

Lesley Battler | Journal | 1994



Journal archive project

Introduction

As a young reader i was fascinated by diaries, journals, notebooks of all kinds. Perhaps part of that attraction was that they seemed a way of telling your own story, remaking the world as you went on. “They” never have the final say in your journal.

I grew up in a family that was shattered by mental illness and writing in a journal was a discipline and a way of keeping myself together; proof I could build an independent life. I was never big on recording my most intimate feelings or expressing myself. For me, the journal existed to help me let go and move beyond the emotional, interior world. I was so much more interested in recording the flora and fauna of the mundane. Daily life was exotic to me.

From the 1980s and on into the Naughts, I wrote in a journal, which I eventually transcribed into electronic format as a project to keep me occupied during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. At first it felt like a self-indulgent pastime, certainly a little irrelevant considering world-events, but as I continued I started feeling maybe there was some value to the project. I decided to preserve them as archives, format them as PDFs and release them onto the Internet where anyone can search, download and use any of the material for projects of their own.

To me, this journal is really an archive, portrait of an era as seen by one insignificant person. It's the insignificance that is truly key here. I love the archives and records of the invisible lives that accumulate into social zeitgeists. Being a journal, it's hit-and-miss what I wrote about, or had time to write about. Huge chunks of my life never made it to the page while there may be hundreds of words devoted to a movie I enjoyed on a hot summer night. I have not added any narrative arc or changed names to keep the journal as intact as possible.

In such a long time span the journal volumes reveal a generation trying to find their way in the world; me and so many of my friends and acquaintances working contract jobs, going to community colleges to learn vocational skills. Spoiler alert: societal change, turbulence, employment issues, generational conflict were just as strong then as they are now. While transcribing the journals I also became fascinated by the rhythm of daily life, how periods of calm so often erupt into times of intense change.

I have taken the original journals and reformatted them into chronological years that begin in January and end in December, and I have included a synopsis with each one to provide a little context. I preserved as much as possible the style and quirks of the original handwritten journals and only employed some light editing to correct place names, and obvious mis-spellings.

These volumes are meant for anyone who is interested in the 1980s and 1990s, in archives, in the lives of young people trying to find a place in the world, in personal impressions of socio-economic-cultural events. This, of course, includes the introduction of the Internet to our daily lives. Please feel free to browse, reuse, recycle any of this material for your own projects. After all this time I still believe information wants to be free.

Vol. 14, 1994

Winter in Montréal – Further adventures in colonialism – The future of railways – I actually go to a home show at the Olympic Stadium – I write a business plan for the first employee-access Internet connection at CPR – The Internet has landed – Evolution (and devolution) of societies on Listservs – An Internet adventure – Deep Suburbia – A momentous provincial election – Liturgy and cyberspace – Down the eastern seaboard to Daytona Beach – the fierce edge of Florida – an f2f meeting – American talk show radio – Cliffhanger reappearance of a university friend.

Jan. 3

New Year's dinner with Fred's family; Marria, Eric, Toni, April and Oma. Symbiotic adversarial relationship between Marria and Oma. It seems to me Marria has never really grown up, continues to live in her mother's shadow. Maybe explains why she's so childishly greedy? Marria is a lot like Boot when Oma is around: sighing, huffing and puffing, doing loud disruptive things, barely able to contain some kind of pent-up anger. Oma, on her part, is high-handed, a woman used to getting her own way, using her money as a weapon, her gifts as tribute or "bonifications." Also much more introspective and perceptive about people than Marria. I'll never get used to this kind of gift-giving. Gifts have conditions attached and I accept them with hesitation, never quite knowing the motivation behind it, feeling I'm being co-opted by Oma for taking it. Gifts are all caught up in this ceaseless power struggle between this mother and daughter. Oma gave Fred and me a rug she bought from a Mexican museum. She has ordered us to hang it up on our entrance wall. I think it will look nice there but Marria glowered and bristled over the entire transaction and insisted she should have it. I just shrugged and let them duke it out. Not my circus, etc.

I received a personal gift from Oma tonight, though. She picked up a pair of horse book-ends at an antique store. When Oma opened the box, she said she was going to give them to a friend and wanted my opinion. I said I loved them, they looked ancient, mysterious. Later, Oma gave them to me and said she had intended to give them to me all along, and she just wanted to find out what I really thought of them. The dinner itself was a forum for those two yentes with Eric occasionally summoned to the kitchen by his mother and exclaimed at in Dutch.

Feb. 1

Long cold winter, snowbanks pitching and heaving around the houses. At night clouds stealth over the moon, snow glints Ajax-blue and I can imagine the Highwayman riding down the deserted street, hooves beating out ciphers in the snow. In the city, another Montréal festival of snow, cars pivoted in frozen tag positions, snow banks the size of every Canadian's childhood memories. Couriers dash into telephone booths, true identities again safely concealed, capes stiff behind their mountain bikes. Wolf-moan of wind through the badlands of the gutted Queen's hotel, snow skirling across the skeletons of parking garages. Cop cars foraging in winter camouflage, tow trucks shadowing the shoulders like undertakers with measuring tape. Battalions of people advancing into the city, grills rolling up, profit-making Red Crosses dispensing coffee, muffins, bagels. The city jump-starts into another day.

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Further adventures in colonialism: I broached a meeting of the St James Literary Society held at the McGill Faculty Club, no less, to hear Rob Rice speak about the future of railways. Privatization, consolidation, amalgamation or merger between CP and CN. Véronique really wanted to hear the talk but couldn't bring herself to go. I went as her eyes and ears but don't think I felt much more comfortable than she would have. Rob Rice looks like a very prosperous Peter Gzowski. He's the former Corporate Communications VP and CP and his newspaper background shines through the corporate appearance.

Had to sit through the proceedings of the meeting of the literary society. The secretary read out the meeting. A ghostly man wearing an ascot which clashed with his shirt and jacket formally introduced Mr Rice and read out the long list of rules making up St James Literary Society protocol. The secretary, one of those terrifying old women straight out of the movies, with complete loyalty to the president, scanned the room checking attendance. I was by far the youngest person there and I did feel as if I had infiltrated an Agatha Christie secret society. I can't wait to describe the scene to Véronique.

Rice was a good speaker; circumspectly political. He said railways are used by governments as instruments of national policy, particularly in regional disputes. In a rather wordy way he conveyed the message that he wants to see CN privatized and presumably merged with CP. If CN were privatized, obviously CP, which is already a private company would be dominant. He tried to cloak his remarks in journalistic objectivity but the man was a CP vice-president. All along, CN has appeared to be the more aggressive of the two mainline railways. But maybe CP is simply being more subtle and sending out its corporate spokespeople to infiltrate various Royal Societies, Empire Club members, etc to convince the wealthy part of the public that privatization is best – which puts CP on top.

Rice continually undermined the government's role in the railway business. He questioned the relationship between CN and public policy, ie, how does transportation fit as a government utility. He said nothing about public trust in state-owned transportation. There are safety issues involved in transportation that go beyond making a profit. I would also like to know how CN can abandon track if it is publicly owned. It was amusing hearing him say CN had an unfair advantage over privately-owned CP as if it were a neutral statement of fact.

According to Rice, CN isn't quite legitimate, that it's the result of a government bail-out of an ailing industry and was created from a conglomeration of small bankrupt rail lines. I don't see how that differs much from CP. It also seems that Canada reveals its total daftness in royal commissions. Rice cited the Drayton-Acworth Royal Commission of 1917. "Railway enterprise is a matter best left in private hands, subject to proper regulation by the government." Conscription if necessary but not necessarily conscription, anyone?

I did learn something about the railway industry though. There has been truck competition since 1931, but it wasn't until August 1950, during a nation-wide rail strike that Canadians finally realized railways weren't all-important. This comes as no surprise. Railways in Canada are like hockey. Even now. During question period, someone stood up and told a story about the old days at the CPR. Everyone started reminiscing about railways. Even the codgers dozing in the back came to life, were animated, lively. Rice, too, became less guarded, more expansive, showing his love for railroads as opposed to the business. I wonder how much, if any, impact these collective memories and images will have on public opinion and how this might affect a merger.

Also found out the Heavy Haul and Intermodalism are two entirely different types of railroading and two separate divisions within the company. Heavy Haul is concentrated out west and consists of bulk commodities eg, coal, grain, potash. Intermodal Freight Service (IFS) is concentrated in the east, largely manufactured goods transported from ship to truck to rail, or any combination of the above. I'm glad I went. I learned something about the industry and I find the politics behind the merger fascinating. I hope to survive through some interesting times.

Feb. 3-9

Light is stronger and slants more deeply across the surfaces of buildings. Cold though. Snow luminous at 5:00 this afternoon. Buildings glowed lunar blue, the lettering "Queen Elizabeth Hotel" like skinned pearl. A barely visible new light lines the shell of snow banks. It may be -20 out here but the light is new, unassailable and it lifts my spirits.

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Been trying to get out and do things besides work this winter, but my every attempt has been foiled. I really looked forward to a Lee Maracle reading at the Hall Building. Caught a 211 bus and enjoyed a wild ride into town with the odd characters who take the 'bus in the evenings. Students, labourers, a few old people with expressions of perpetual outrage. The radio roared "Kashmir" down the highway, the lights were off; a cold, dark, noisy, hilariously dramatic ride into town.

Ran into Kathy Watt at Lionel-Groulx, which was pleasant. We parted at Guy and I went on to the reading. Found the room, hidden down a corridor, which in turn is hidden by the cafeteria. On the door was a scribbled piece of paper: "Unfortunately, reading cancelled." Seriously. Was there really no way of posting that message in the main lobby? It was not easy finding the centre of the labyrinth. The same thing happened when I attempted to go to a Sharon Olds reading at Dawson College. "Reading postponed until April 7." At least there were signs posted everywhere, even at Métro level. Passed on the Richard Sommers reading.

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Ventured out to see two comics, Janis Kirshner and Laura Mitchell, “Female Bondage” at the Snowdon Y. Lively crowd, everyone craning around looking for friends and enemies. Someone behind me grumbled, “We’re running on Jewish time here?” A tiny woman pushed her way past me to get to the group of people sitting next to me. She looked at the youngest woman in her group and said, “So *when* are you getting married?” Sir Charles Tupper was there. He is an elderly man with Father of Confederation muttonchops who is always accompanied by a woman. I see him everywhere I go. He is also a member of the St James Literary Society. Go figure.

Janis Kirshner performs stand-up comedy at parties, has written and directed a comedy radio show and is also a traffic reporter on Q92. Laura Mitchell is intense and a bit edgy. She’s from the southern US. She also teaches acting and gives prison workshops. They were engaging and a good match. Too many of their best lines were buried in scenes that went on too long. It wasn’t cutting edge comedy; the usual litany of motherhood, relationships and PMS reminding me of *Grace Under Fire*. The most interesting and heart-felt part of the evening occurred when JK and LM were riffing about their grandmothers.

This segued into a woman they’ve both spoken to, and obviously feel a great deal of compassion for, the pen-lady on Ste-Catherine. She’s a francophone woman, the age of their grandmothers, and gets up every morning to sell her pens on the street. JK and LM stepped out of comedy into an emotional social engagement. I’d like to see them explore this more deeply – character studies with an eye on the larger social issues. I loved how this woman grew out thinking about their own grandmothers. Criticisms notwithstanding, I enjoyed the evening. I love comedy and if nothing else I finally got out and did something on a winter night.

Feb. 21

Met Gail and Maria at Place Ville Marie after work. Maria can be tiresome but there is something plucky about her, and in spite of her dreary litanies there's an appealing eagerness to her. But Gail and I were miles away from her in conversation, and Maria had to constantly bring us back to earth, not really understanding what we were talking about half the time. Maria never stops striving. She tries so hard in everything she does, struggles with life and there's an intensity in her eyes and in the set of her lips. There's always a black cloud over her head but her eyes shine with eagerness. She really seems to want to be my friend, and I don't exactly have people lined up around the block for that honour. But she just doesn't have Gail's depth, emotional understanding or her spark and humour.

Gail's youngest son Ryan moved out and Gail told us she was wandering down the hall clutching his old teddy bear. She said she's been so upset and worried and heavy-hearted about Ryan, all she can do is stare at the wall. She didn't feel like getting out of bed and Ravil finally told her she was going to drive herself crazy.

Feb. 26

Maria's been calling me all day. Finally agreed to go to the home show exhibition at the Olympic Stadium with her and her husband, Kenny. I guess that's what happens when you move to the suburbs. Kenny is Chinese. He seems nice enough but Maria is always taking the initiative. She takes his arm, makes all of the proprietary gestures, trying so hard as always. I dislike being in these couple situations, the awkward feeling any time I'm left alone with the husband; all we do is sit there breathing at each other.

In a lot of ways the home show was like roaming through a virtual reality room. The Olympic Stadium is vast and crowds prevented me from getting close enough to any of the exhibits to touch the furniture or even get a sense it was something real. Rested on the bleachers at one point, watching the crowds beneath me, configurations of tiny people I could imagine moving as a block of text with a mouse. Crowd-hum, reverberations from the building itself, knowledge the the Big O is full of fault lines.

Wandered in and out of artificial rooms, simulations of living rooms, kitchens, bathrooms but devoid of any human touches to make them real. Trying to make my way down the aisles made me feel we were trapped in the home shopping network, crowds swarming around hundreds of miracle gadgets, cacophony or competing shills and snake-oil barkers. Interesting, but not something I really want to do again.

March 6

Reading at the Atwater Library. Zhimei Zhang (*A Woman in Mao's China*) and Charles Foran (*Sketches of Winter*, his impressions of modern China). Interesting reading. Zhang and Foran were opposites in every way. This was Z's first public reading and she was nervous. She spoke in a quiet voice with long pauses in which she both tried to get her bearings within her book and feel out the audience. She kept asking us if she had read too much, if we wanted to hear any more, if it was okay to go on reading. My heart went out to her, and it seems everyone also sympathized with her.

Foran, on the other hand, took immediate control, knew every public speaking trick in the book. He reminded me a bit of Peter, one of the phony reporters on *Murphy Brown*. Zhang's book was a memoir; she could barely control her emotions while reading. Foran went straight for entertainment. He's the outsider to China, yet he came across as more confident, even authoritarian. Although I did enjoy his reading I was really pleased to see the audience much more interested in Zhimei Zhang. At the end of the reading, she was the one who received all the questions. I found it fun watching Foran standing in the background, unable to compete with Z's authenticity. He's probably considered an expert on China.

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Ya'acov and Kayla came to visit with Gavi and Chana. Y has exams coming up. He's studying to be a rabbi. He says the questions are tough because although there's usually a yes or no answer, the yes or no can often be qualified, over-ridden or changed according to circumstance. This means he has to know the laws but also be able to rule on each situation that comes up.

Economically, things are rough with them right now. Y hasn't had much photography work in a while. A little assignment he received lately enabled them to pay the rent. He also has to decide where to send Gavi to school. Gavi has Attention Deficiency Disorder and is on medication and requires a special diet. He has some learning problems and is reading at a lower level than he should be, so choosing a school is a big worry. Chana is a lovely child. I love her so much. She has a wonderful chuckly laugh and Ya'acov beamed with pride when he heard me say that to Kayla. Chana sits on my lap as if I'm someone she sees all the time, wraps her little arms around me and I melt. I even got to tell her a story.

Things were much easier between Kayla and me this time. I had fun with her today. We went through my bookcases and commented on the books. She loved an autograph book I have from the 1800s and it was nice looking through it with her. She's the first person who has ever noticed it. We also talked about Gavi. I can see Y is going to have his hands full with Gavi. Kayla said Gavi has inherited Ya'acov's temper; she can see the Bauer starting to come out in him.

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Mary Rose left a message on the machine. Haven't heard from her in months and then she calls to say she has a question to ask, as if it's been a week since I last saw her. She is still oblivious – said we could reach her early in the morning or late at night. I think she simply refuses to accept the fact that some people have to go to work. Oh well ...

March 11-13

Visit from Sharon. We picked her up at the airport and spotted her immediately at luggage pick-up. She is a singular person. Will never get over how she looks intimidating and vulnerable at the same time. We spent a quiet time together, talking mostly, no more imposing people on her. I am not Marsha and there is no reason for me to try putting groups together, especially since I am not good at it. Sharon and I both get starved for conversation and would rather just talk than do anything else anyway. We always cover the same subjects but it's a release, a glorious dump of familiar obsessions; boring co-workers, not having kids, how different we both feel from other people.

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Richard Dubreuil, an artist Fred met through an MLIS party, was giving an exhibition of his work in his apartment on Parc. The three of us ended up going. Richard lives in a gorgeous old apartment in a complex I have often noticed on my way to the Rialto and the Bagel Factory. I loved climbing the stairs to the apartment, seeing the old radiators. There's something about entering an apartment like this, like entering another world, the world inside the cabinet. Hardwood floors, high ceilings, leaded glass windows. Sharon was impressed by it too. Visiting Richard was a lot like visiting Francisco. Nice communal atmosphere, all kinds of people roaming around, a family sitting on the floor drawing pictures.

I liked his work, particularly one painting because of the colour and textures of the paint. Something reminiscent of fibre optics in the way the colours blended, mixed and transmitted their own messages. Sharon told him the paintings reminded her of the Group of Seven. Richard agreed and looked pleased. "Oh good," she said. "We haven't made a faux pas." I found there was something intense about Richard though. He made me uncomfortable and this time I was the one who wanted to leave. I think Sharon actually enjoyed the visit; later she said she'd rather spend time with "that artist" than 90% of her co-workers.

March 16

Worried about my job. Since I started at BIS it has been an extremely busy job, but I have had nothing to do this week. Susan Baumann has been given extra hours and so I don't do any research work at all. Ever since we got ABI/INFORM on CD-Rom, my document delivery service has been cut in half. Now I just print documents. Only convention dictates there should be a back-up person up front and since everyone else is getting voice mail and answering machines, there's no reason why BIS shouldn't do the same. No one needs to be on a front desk at all. On top of it all, Véronique has been acting strange. She's been hovering around my work area, doing a lot of the work herself, work she never had the interest or time for.

Véronique wanted me to show her how to call up MUSE and CLUES (McGill and Concordia online catalogues) and then show Penny. Carol sent a request into my in-basket. Then Véronique told me not to worry about it; Susan would do it. I added all this up and came to the conclusion my job was going to be cut but no one could admit it to my face yet.

Enter the subplot. Theo Lawrence called from McGill (good old database management) to see if I'd be interested in taking a year term position with them. It was a pleasant conversation and I said I would think about it. A term appointment in itself is nothing to leave CP for, and I wouldn't make nearly as much money as I do in my current job. However, a term position would give me status as an internal for a year, which as Theo said, would make me a shoo-in for any library job posted throughout the year. I'd be back on campus, near my friends. Of course this offer has evoked all the good things about McGill. I didn't know what to do. I want to do the job at BIS, but if I'm losing it I need to grab work when it comes up! I also felt I had to let Véronique or Carol know I knew my job was being phased out.

After my conversation with Theo, I scribbled some details on a yellow phone message slip and left it on my desk. The bait was taken (which also proves that I am under surveillance). Véronique saw the slip of paper, just as I had intended. Later in the afternoon she asked if I was planning to leave. I feigned surprise at her question, then told her all about Theo's offer. I asked Véronique if I was going to lose my job. What I got were some very kind words from Véronique and reassurance that my job is not in any (immediate) jeopardy.

Véronique told me she liked me and I have a mixture of really good qualities. I am witty and I work hard and well. I have streamlined and simplified all aspects of my job. I am pleasant and discreet and our clients adore me. I told Véronique I liked and respected her and every time she explained something to someone I would listen in because I knew I would learn something from it. And if anyone is witty it is Véronique. I felt a little guilty about pulling that little trick, but it got results – the opposite from what I had expected. Right from the interview CP has gone completely against my expectations. I am really flying blind here.

March 17

Scary night in the city. The 211 looked like it was full of convicts out on an evening pass. A drunk tried to annoy me and I buried myself in a Ruth Rendell. Her persisted and I finally told him I was reading a murder-mystery and had to find out whodunnit. He mumbled something about only trying to be friendly, to make conversation. I shrugged. I am getting way too old to feel guilt over that kind of thing any more. I have the right to read a book in peace.

I was going to see Allen Ginsberg at the Hall Building, but as soon as I entered I knew I wouldn't even get close to the auditorium. I have never seen such a huge crowd for any reader or speaker. Students entered the building paused in disbelief. "What the hell is going on?" People stood on chairs, scouted for friends. Crowd ranged from eighteen year-olds in grunge to art-lit trendies in black to contingents of hippies, jeans, granny dresses. I saw Stan Asher and overheard him tell a friend he had been there since 7:15 and hadn't been able to get in either.

Even after the doors closed people didn't leave. They crushed to the door hoping they could at least hear his voice. Someone called security. A student with a bullhorn exhorted everyone to go home and get lives. There was a sit-in. It did look a bit like the sixties, except the ponytails were all grey! Not a nice night out on the streets. Aggressively drunk noisy sports gangs. General bad vibe. I was very glad the crowd at the Hall Building was so docile, because this felt just like the night of the Stanley Cup riot.

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Although it will always be Terry and Ted in the morning, I've started listening to the CBC. If there is such a thing as Canadian identity, the CBC constantly reminds you of it. One day I even heard the Ontario song: "Give us a place to sta-a-and and a place to gro-ow ..." The CBC can make you believe Mulroney never existed, our social programs aren't all threatened etc. Even subjects like political correctness on university campuses (which always comes up for some bizarre reason considering how few people it affects) are sifted through a middle-class, middle-ground, reasonable filter.

Everyone on the CBC seems to have the same voice; a reasonable devil's advocate voice. But so many of these hosts are Canadian establishment and remind me a bit of characters I used to see at McGill. Which isn't surprising considering how many were born in the UK. Max Ferguson is one of those. He plays a lot of children's choirs on his show, various military bands, bawdy songs. He also plays some lovely Celtic and international music. We first heard Loreena McKennitt on his show. He intersperses this with strange excerpts from British comedy albums, again often featuring kids. If he weren't so generally all-round daft I'd suspect him of being a pedophile. He also rambles at great length about himself, revealing rather more about his sexual fantasies than anyone could ever care to know.

Murray McLauchlan's show is a self-congratulatory meeting of old cronies in the Canadian music biz. He is always wallowing in self-pity and leading his guests to do the same, about the heartless music biz. He seems to think he should have made more money and his jealousy over other people's successes is amusingly visible. He talks about the CBC the way many employees talk about McGill. This guy seems to have life-long tenure at the CBC and he makes me think of John Metcalf railing against the Canada Council.

I like Louise Penney's show. Normally I detest phone-in shows, but this one is usually interesting and she is adept at cutting off the cranks, especially the old folks from the West Island who try to turn every topic into a forum for their grievances against Québec separatists. A wide variety of topics is aired on the show: teenaged girls who think they have weight problems, how people endured the winter, Irish traditions on St Patrick's day. Penney must have some interesting views of people, especially gleaned from her male and female callers. The men are more aggressive and combative, and they will fight with each other on the show.

Sometimes I enjoy Vicky Gaboreau, but often find her over the top. I find her "just folks" shtick tends to overshadow her guests. I love the show "Roots and Wings." I wish there were more music shows like this on the CBC. I can never find any of this music at HMV. "Brand X" is one of my favourite shows. At first I thought it was a bunch of middleaged CBC tenure-tracks trying to capitalize on the Generation X hype, which I still say is a hoax. I was whining about the baby-boomer conspiracy long before Coupland's book came out. The show is trendy, full of sound bites, quick cuts from subject to subject and lots of talk about the Net. About time!

March 26

A lot of anglo plays lately, so many new little theatre companies I can't keep track of them. Cool underground feeling about going to the plays, maybe because the venues are small and scattered all over the city. Saw *Five or Six Characters in Search of Toronto* at McGill's Player's Theatre. It is 'Time Zero. The clock has stopped in 1994, depicted by a great sinister Art Deco clock. Six urban tribes rise from the wreckage of a bus crash en route to the mythical land of "Toronto," meeting at Time Zero. Highway lines painted on the stage were effective, existential, futuristic and chilling like the clock. Each character has a dream of Toronto, and they're the reasons why most people go there. All the characters are stereotypes: an insular po-mo lit-crit theory-head, a Gen-Xer, a francophone hockey player, an elitist Canada Council arbiter, an aspiring ethnic writer and a generic all-purpose Indian (from India) mystic.

Some of the lines were good, some were unnecessarily didactic, especially when the characters all donned masks and danced. The scene did add to the futuristic quality in the play. I would have liked to have seen the Metropolis element developed more. It was a consistent part of the play in its setting, music, dance and the hieratic positions of the characters themselves. To me, the best scene of the play took place when the mysterious bus driver took his seat, holding a disembodied steering wheel. He turns his head to the audience, reveals himself to be an Indian and says, "What did you expect? I'm from the East End." The wild mysterious east; the wild mysterious east end.

March 28

After being so worried about my job disappearing Carol and Véronique gave me the Internet project. BIS wants a commercial connection. Apparently we're going alone on this; Computers & Communications (C&C) won't be involved. This is yet another example of the Byzantine separation between departments and the strange sense of secrecy endemic in this corporate culture. The clients themselves are mostly polite and courteous yet there's a complete lack of communication and cooperation between departments. Each one acts like an autonomous unit, a separate company. For example, when I call C&C it's hard to remember they're actually a unit within CP Rail.

CP is even worse than McGill with its departments all working at cross-purposes. Here, each department is also in competition with each other and of course, the merger is intensifying this atmosphere. The Mechanical department recently restructured and everyone had to reapply for their current positions. Now it's Engineering's turn. This lack of security or stability doesn't create a pleasant work experience. Are all companies like this? So I guess it's not an anomaly for this company that we're going alone as a separate unit on the Internet. Richard Laferriere is interested in the Net and wants to get a connection for his own department, Cost and Business Analysis. I can't for the life of me understand why CP doesn't have a corporate connection. CN's Dechief Library already has a connection. They too have gone alone but they went for a full dedicated connection through RISQ. Véronique found out that they feel they made a mistake and are planning to switch to a smaller, less expensive link, a dial-up IP connection.

I am really excited about this. The Internet project could be the beginning of something good. It'll be great on my CV, I'm learning a lot about the Internet and more about computers in general. I find the Internet fascinating on so many levels. It's like a galaxy circling over us and an entire cosmology has developed around it. Packet-switching is fascinating too, the way information is routed. So many services and support industries, not to mention tomes, sprouting around the Net. The Net is always being touted as being anarchy or a pure form of democracy, yet there are a lot of censorship cases and systems operators certainly seem to have a lot of authority. Societies are being created on the Net and it is so interesting to watch them start, the flame wars which develop, formation of ethics committees, factions, all of it done through email.

Of course it has a whole brand new terminology and it can be daunting. FTP, for instance is both a proper name, File Transfer Protocol, the application which allows you to transfer and download files. It is also a verb in that you FTP to a site. Same with telnet. And World Wide Web – is that another service, application or another network. Are there WWW sites or is it a separate entity? I know Mosaic is software which accesses WWW. If we got Mosaic at BIS would we be able to access the WWW or would that depend on the type of connection we choose. Is WWW accessible only through a dedicated line? This doesn't even scratch the surface of my questions about the Net.

Organizations like CRIM – what are they exactly. They’re not regulatory bodies. I gather BITNET (Because It’s Time Network) is like a branchline railway as opposed to a mainline. I also gather that it’s being subsumed into the Internet. But everything I read seems to supply me with one little piece of concrete info and I’m trying to put together a giant jigsaw puzzle. Fred says I’m asking “very pointed, precise questions.” As a computer specialist in an academic library he knows a lot more about computers and the Internet that I do, and we talk about this on the train most mornings.

April 5

The Internet has been around since the late 1960s and has just burst into the mainstream now – a twenty-year gap. It started as ARPAnet, a system connecting various computers around the US at sites doing research for the Advanced Research Projects Agency network. This organization became DARPA, co-opted by the military to ensure the military could still receive and transmit information in case of nuclear war. Talk about the Industrial-Military complex! Not to mention the inseparability of university research and the military. Now in 1994, the Internet has become an industrial military galaxy circling around us. It all has to do with wide-area packet-switching and TCP/IP (Transfer Control Protocol/Internet Protocol).

Packet-switching is cool. This takes me back to my BHCL days when I found fibre optics so fascinating. You type a message on your computer screen, eg, “this is a test.” Each character of the message is converted into a digital code (binary). The characters are batched, the size of the batch determined by the individual computer program involved. The batch is then slipped into an envelope and addressed. Each batch is made up of the same number of characters and has an address, beginning, message-batch and end of batch. When the message is converted and reaches the other end, the envelopes are stripped off, the batches are sorted in order and then appear on your screen!

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So many facets to the Internet. I've been reading stories in the *Village Voice* about role-playing games occurring through the Usenet application. One strange article, "A Rape in Cyberspace," in which a character named "Mr Bungle" raped another character in a MUD room. Both parties were role-playing, neither using their true identities. In response, this particular MUD community set up a committee and turned to the systems operator to have "Mr Bungle" excommunicated from the community, the highest penalty given out to a Nethead. A truly creepy, frightening story.

Meanwhile, in the mainstream, Fred has been subscribed to a Feline-L list for about a year. It's a discussion list for cat-lovers and a place where people from all over the US and Canada tell stories about their cats, exchange tips, commiserate with each other over deaths of family members. Fred has come to know these people as friends and then something went wrong on a FUR run. FUR stands for "Feline Underground Railway," which is an arrangement people make to transport cats to new homes. It's a driving relay, which can involve as many as ten people at ten locations, all of whom make most of the arrangements through the Internet. During this FUR run, one of the relay drivers kept the cat (with the owner's blessing) instead of continuing the run to its original destination.

Well, the flame wars started. Circuitry melted, fur flew. It only took seconds for people to take sides and made pronouncements, no matter how long and cordial their friendship had been. There were two major positions. The cat was promised to an individual. The owner reneged on a promise. Someone wanted this cat and this is unethical. The second maintained that the purpose of FUR is to get a cat to a safe home. The cat is at a safe home. What's the problem? Well, the cat's original owner was angry, the person who kept the cat was insulted, the end person who presumably wanted the cat and had prepared for their arrival was cut out, an agreement (and a trust) broken. Members of Feline-L formed an ethics committee to deal with these questions and also to judge the particulars of this FUR run.

So it seems as if I have seen an entire society evolve. It started as a loosely knit group of cat lovers, and now includes moderators and three list subsets: Feline-L, FUR and Ethics. Now they have developed a paper document, a kind of Codex FUR and a contract which the two main parties involved in a FUR run have to sign. Holy Max Weber, it's Cyberspace Sociology 101! And this is a non-political cat-lover's list-serve. Animal rights and vegetarianism are not even approved topics. I don't think I want to spend any time lurking on Politics-L.

The Internet is also so entrepreneurial. It has that kind of forceful, sometimes creative energy right now. It is the place of commerce in spite of the high-flown denials of commercial activity. It is all commerce, transaction, promotion and barter. It is a market place, a public square, a bazaar, a huge garage sale. An incredible opportunity to watch societies form, link, pollinate each other. A digital silk road.

**

Attended an Internet seminar for McGill staff and students. It was held in the basement of Burnside Hall, where every door looks the same, and typically, there were no signs for this seminar. I finally found the right place and no one questioned me on my attendance. I would say that one-third of library staff present haven't remembered I've left; one-third wouldn't squeal on me and the other third are trying to get me to come back. I slipped in beside Cynthia's friend Mary Anne, who is now a LAN administrator at Law. Everyone present seemed to know about Camorg, and I felt like the only person in the entire city who hasn't been able to get any information from them. They haven't responded to my phone calls, haven't answered my faxes, and I felt like a wallflower at the Camorg festival.

Graham Thorpe gave the seminar. He used some good analogies and gave a good demonstration of the World Wide Web and Mosaic software. Mosaic is Alice in Wonderland software. Printed text comes up on the screen with certain words highlighted. You click on one word, and because it is hypertext, you pull up another document pertaining to that word. It could be a footnote, citation, definition, an entire menu. It's like slipping into tunnels with the White Rabbit.

A document on transportation could contain a reference to CP Rail. Click on CP Rail, you could pull up hundreds of things: a menu, a brief corporate history, a detailed corporate history, information about the logo, a bibliography. Anything someone sees fit to add. I guess if you became familiar with Mosaic, you would in the end learn more about the mind of a programmer than anything else? But the demo was so impressive. If you add a sound card you can click on an icon and get a sound, and graphics are becoming more and high-resolution. I'm so glad they gave me this Internet project and I don't care if it was because no one else wanted to do it. I'm learning so much and will at least have some idea how the system works before it moves completely beyond comprehension. It will also be a good thing to have on my CV.

April 7

Lunch with Véronique. A pleasure as always. She and Nicholas are moving back to the city after living in Lachine for seven years. The commuting and lack of places to go and things to do in the suburbs have gotten to her. They are buying a condo in Old Montréal! Véronique and I have had many great conversations about suburbia and it's great knowing someone who feels the way I do about it. She's turning thirty-nine in August and thinking of having a baby. Then we veered right off of that subject and started talking about underground economies and the growing strength of the mafia all over the world; Russia, Italy, the South of France and of course the "contraband crisis" here in Canada. I love these talks so much, always so unpredictable and stimulating.

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Sharon Olds reading at Dawson College. Intense poetry, vivid imagery. I most appreciated her sly, dry sense of humour.

April 8

To Amelio's with Fred and one of his library school friends, Pascal Colarco. Pascal is a true Nethead and not only did I understand what he and Fred were talking about I could keep up and participate in the conversation. First time I have ever enjoyed a conversation focused on computers. Freenet is coming to Montréal and Pascal is involved with it. I have seen his name mentioned in *The Mirror* as a contact. I wondered if Freenet would affect my own investigation into the Internet, if I should change my approach in getting BIS connected. Found out that Freenet doesn't have telnet or FTP applications so I can definitely rule it out for BIS. FreeNet seems to be a BBS (bulletin board service) and one we could access after we get connected.

After Amelio's we headed to the Old Dublin Pub to hear Orealis. Since it was Friday night, it wasn't full of the usual crowd of Orthodox Jews. We have often gone there with Ya'acov and Kayla. A group of students were clapping and swaying. It was strange watching them. Not too long ago I would have been part of such a group instead of sitting on the sidelines watching them in their various stages of drunkenness. I thought of Val, Marsha, Chris Hope, Rob etc, and felt old and homesick for those student days. But although I sometimes miss the ecstasy of a good group drunk I am really too old to handle the hangover. A woman, obviously a bar regular, floated from group to group exhorting young men to get up and dance with her. She latched on to the large student group and it was interesting to watch those loud animated kids shrink in her presence, turn in on themselves.

Orealis was disappointing. I have one of their CDs and it's lovely Celtic music with an airy techno quality. There were only two Orealis members at the old Dublin and they played "Red Rover" stuff, stock Finnegan's fare, which I enjoy as much as anyone else, but nothing like their could. I exchanged glances with a man across the room. He had been furtively looking at me for a while. I discovered he was a CP employee, a familiar face in the concourse. That's it. I know I'm getting old when I end up in the same pub with my clientele.

April 13

They're gutting the corridor of Windsor Station now, where C+C used to be. The drab suite of offices with the blue corridor now looks like its seen mortar-fire. Clouds of asbestos, flurries of lead paint. The construction pit outside the station is widening every day so it looks like an archeological dig. All this demolition reflects what's going on inside the company with this corporate restructuring. The big unions (UAW) are threatening strike, management is threatening the unions. Mayhem inside and out.

We also lost our bathroom but found another one in B-wing. It is a David Lynch bathroom, full of 1940s-style sofas, chairs, mirrors. Cavernous and full of nooks and sharp angles. A film noir interior. Easy to imagine Barbara Stanwyck stumbling into the room, glancing at her own terror-stricken face in the round frameless mirror.

**

Last trip to our Tillemont apartment to pick up the last of our rubble. Talked with Joe's brother Romeo about my job because he knows about the situation at CP. It was nice seeing the apartment again. Joe has painted it and it brought back to me the clean elegant apartment we saw four years ago on the run from Gartner. The bar across the street was in disarray and may be closed! Groups of Black and Italian kids on the street. It was last summer when the noise from the bar was unendurable, the apartment air was heavy and stifling as a swamp, noises and smells floating in from the street, car stereo boomboxes, drunken brawls, all those people in the phone booth shouting all night, Raymond's cooking smell and his awful cologne. All the fruits and vegetables in the ruelle, laundry flapping from clotheslines.

Felt very nostalgic about seeing Tillemont again, but the new house is so beautiful, such a sanctuary, I still feel as if I'm on vacation, staying in someone else's house for a visit. Leaf shadows move across the kitchen table like reflections on water. It feels as if I live beside a river.

May 8

Marsha and her youngest sister, Donnalee, stopped in on an overnight visit, returning from Maine. I was curious to meet Donnalee, “the slut” from all the Donnalee stories I’ve heard through the years. She wasn’t anything like I expected. Nothing seductive or provocative about her. In fact, she looked quiet and subdued, round-shouldered in a loose dress and pink sweater. Her eyes wouldn’t meet mine. She even looked like someone who has been in a hospital for a while. She is a children’s librarian in Toronto and spends a lot of her time in bookstores, sourcing old Strathemeyer Syndicate series books. There are hundreds of titles besides Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys. Marsha has ranted many times about this passion of Donnalee’s but collectors live in their own worlds. Donnalee warned me not to ask her about the books. I did anyway and Donnalee could have talked all night about them and it really broke the ice.

Fred picked up pizza from Romano’s. Marsha pulled the chair over to the blanket box and we ate there, very comfortable, companionable. So many of our visitors, including Sharon, sit so stiffly on our chairs now and I’m not sure why people are so much more formal here in the house than they were in our apartments. Donnalee seemed anxious to dissociate herself from Marsha to assert her own identity. She was quick to point out she doesn’t drink as much as her sister. Several times during the conversation Donnalee inserted little editorials and caveats. She commented how Marsha’s stories were exaggerations and things don’t necessarily match the truth. Strong sibling rivalry between the, Not surprising, considering they’re more than half-sisters (3/4 sisters?) and how competitive Marsha can be.

Marsha didn’t say anything about pregnancy. She said something about having had a crisis with John, but there’s always a crisis with John. The big news is that their mother (M and D’s) is getting married to a minister she has been seeing. Neither Marsha nor Donnalee like Dave the minister. In typical fashion, Marsha listed all the qualities she disliked about Dave, then philosophically proclaimed that her mother deserved happiness and none of them expected her to go on without finding another man. Donnalee told a different story. She made a few too many comments about being abandoned and said she doesn’t have a mother any more.

Fascinating situation. Donnalee's mother is Marsha's Aunt Marge. I definitely get the feeling that Marge, being Marsha's step-mother and Donnalee's real mother is a source of tension and competition between them. Donnalee is proprietary about her mother. She talked about being abandoned but she never lost her mother as Marsha did. But they both lost the same father and grandparents. There must be an incredible amount of common feeling between them; a constant coming together and pulling apart.

May 9

Submitted my Internet report to Carol. I noted what we needed, why we needed it, the cost involved, general breakdown of the cost and then recommended we deal with Robert Quance at Metrix InterLink. The report was surprisingly well-received. I did spend quite a bit of time on it, not only calling vendors but also in learning the lingo and trying to describe as succinctly as possible the various parts, how each little thing fits into the whole, when an Internet term is a noun, when it's a verb, what is a software application, etc. Véronique and Carol were appreciative but the best response was from Heather Berardinucci, the cataloguing librarian. She is very well-organized and she understood how much info I had accumulated and analyzed in order to present it so succinctly. They all said I made the Net sound "fun and easy."

**

Warm, sunny Saturday. Checked out the anglo book fair at the Faubourg. A more dynamic energy than I remember from last year. I hope it isn't choked by so much insularity. It's like being on the commuter train and seeing the same faces every day. Ran into Ruth Taylor. I was hoping we could talk a bit, but she's president of FEWQ (Federation of English Writers of Québec, I think) this year and was only interested in giving me a sales spiel about joining the group. I was also taken aback when she told me FEWQ has started a program for bringing writers into schools and she thought my work would be good for that. I smiled, nodded and refrained from telling her to FEWQ off. Never going down the children's story road again.

May 19-22

An Internet adventure – a FUR run to be exact. Met some of Fred's virtual buddies. A FUR run is an intricately organized relay linked together by people on the Feline-L list. It stands for Feline Underground Railroad and transports cats to safe homes, also arranged by people on the list. A woman in Toronto, Carla Hagstrom was ordered to give up one of her cats by her husband. Her messages gave me the impression she was trapped in an abusive relationship. The cat, Prit, is a stray Carla started feeding and was, apparently the straw that broke the camel's back in her relationship. A woman in Maryland wanted Prit, so Fred volunteered to be the first relay driver.

We made it to Toronto and stayed overnight at Sharon's. We didn't get to see Sharon though as we arrived later than we expected. She had school the next day and was going to bed come hell or high water or lunatic visitors manifesting a virtual adventure. Early Friday morning we arrived at Carla Hagstrom's to pick up Prit. We waited for ages in a very sterile living room talking to the Husband. I expected a brute, but he was nice to us. The house was spotless, no sign of children, or of any lives being lived, yet the fireplace area was strewn with opened gifts, children's things. The whole scene was disorienting and nothing fit.

I think Carla said her husband was Egyptian and I have no idea what goes on in their private life, but if he hated the cates he didn't reveal even the mildest dislike to us. He referred to them with affection and told us more cat-stories than Carla did. Either Carla over-reacts in email messages, invents stories to attract attention, or he's the best actor I've come across in a long time. When he found out we were driving to Syracuse and then back up to Kingston, he said he could have driven Prit to Kingston! Carla, on the other hand, seemed surprised we had arrived so early. In fact, she seemed a little ungrateful. I liked the "brute" husband but wasn't sure about her.

No matter. Prit was a beautiful little cat and I focused on her and her new home in Maryland. Prit had long soft hair. Mostly white with some unique black markings. Slightly slanted eyes and high cheekbones. A lovely exotic little cat and I felt very protective about her while driving to Syracuse. We stopped a few times to open the door but she preferred the security of the cage. Unlike our two howling hooligans Prit was very quiet and my heart ached to see her suffering in silence.

The car knocked and pinged all the way to Syracuse but we made it. Long line at Customs and we expected an agent to read the riot act at us, but we were just waved on through. Met the next relay driver at our appointed rendezvous. We had signs to identify ourselves but didn't need them. We knew that car parked by the side of the road was Nancy Kaiser's. Nancy was frank and hearty and brought us snacks. She was with a friend who was bemused by the whole adventure. They're academic library employees, which makes sense as they are the people most likely to be connected to the Internet right now. We took pictures. It's become a FUR run tradition to take photos at all of the relay stops. A nice custom, providing souvenirs for the new cat parent, history and record of the journey. I know I would love such a souvenir.

The Internet connection makes it exciting too. I wonder how we'll all feel ten years from now when we look at our souvenirs from these early (public) days of the Net. I wonder how much the Net will grow or change in ten years. I wonder if we'll all be saying, "That was back in the early days before the corporate takeovers and advertising, when people formed their own societies and helped each other."

Then we spent some time with Xotil (pronounced Zo-chee). She was Central Command for this FUR run. This is a physical location where people involved in a run can call in and leave messages. She invited us over for refreshments and offered to put us up for the night. A real spirit of generosity on the Internet. She's around my age, which is nice. Most people I know are at least five years older than I am, or five years younger. Although we ended up talking mostly about cats, her apartment was full of interesting things, including a collection of ERA buttons in her bathroom. But we headed to Kingston to spend the night with Marsha and John.

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Kingston. Their friend Bill was there as ironic, sarcastic and intermittently witty as ever. He was funny tonight though. Marsha was railing about authoritarian Chinese men and Bill cut in, "And they can't drive either." Marsha continued her rant. "They're smarter than we are though," said Bill. "Especially in math," I joined in, "But we're number two." Marsha finally caught on and we all had a great laugh.

Marsha and Bill have a strange relationship. He is always there but he so often mocks her. He's like a professional de-bunker, one of those people who spend their whole lives writing critiques and rants against arcane subjects like religion, astrology or UFOs, unable to accept that they are as obsessed as the true believers.

**

Went to see a Neil Simon play, *Chapter Two*, at the Domino Theatre with Marsha, John, Marilyn and Matthew. I actually dozed off at one point. Marsha and I went on a long walk through Kingston. All the trees and brick houses seemed to float, shadow-splashed streets, windows like lighthouses. Every little house so different from the one next to it. Marsha is worried about her friend, Pat Murray, who is in love with an "alcoholic loser from Florida." She met him on vacation, kept returning to Florida to meet him and now she's brought him back to Kingston where, according to Marsha, he's living off her. Marsha figures Pat is desperate and Marsha is, of course, in a moral quandary over seeing Pat with this goof.

Tough subject. Cutting off the friend isn't a good solution – you lose the friendship. Rejecting the lover is rejecting the friend, or a huge part of the friend's life. To Marsha, accepting the lover is condoning a relationship you feel is bad for the friend. In a way it also supports the friend's low self-esteem, which led to the relationship in the first place. Marsha was sort of asking for advice, or as close to it as Marsha comes. I never went through school with a boyfriend, never wanted to get married and am kind of a Mr Spock when it comes to relationships but I tried. I said in a fumbly and bumbly way that the only thing I could think of is to try being as honest and sensitive as possible, tell Pat you want to keep her friendship but she's better than that guy and you can't handle the relationship. Do things with Pat, call her, listen to her, don't do things as a couple. Marsha said that was a good idea, she'd try it. She was humouring me! A very uncharacteristic Marsha response; she was really concerned about Pat and their friendship.

June 2

A man wandered into the BIS office today. He was a in Montréal for the first time in years, staying at the Queen Elizabeth. He wanted to visit Windsor Station and see the trains but when he reached the station there were no trains, not even the commuter trains. “Where are the trains?” he asked me in this sad little voice. I had to tell him I started at CP last year and I had never seen them, didn’t remember them. He shook his head in disbelief and said, “My daddy used to work for the CPR.”

June 14

No matter how cool spring is, heat drops like an anvil on the city in mid-June. Every year the same wall of heat and humidity. The sky is bruised, every degree the temperature rises pushing it to its breaking point. The luminous fluidity of spring has reified into oppressive heat. No more change and regeneration. The world has been created, no more potentiality. The light coming in through the window is a movie-projector light, no more riverine reflections, tremblings, whisperings, fragile outlines where stems are formed in light and chlorophyll. But there are lilacs. They are an oasis, a mirage in the heat. There’s something dreamlike about them. They always seem to preserve a cool aloofness even when their scent is filling my pores.

It also seems that the Fringe Festival brings the heat. Left work early to see a play. Very hot on St-Laurent. Sensory bombardment; heat, smells, colour. Buildings melting into each other. St-Laurent full of trendy people. A student slunk into an oven-like brick building. His t-shirt said, “Down With the O.P.P.” (yes, periods and all). A scruffy little park twinkling with broken glass. Weeds, sand, rocks. Discount stores, aisle after aisle of the same trinkets. So many of these stores here now, so many trinkets. The Main looked bleak in spite of all the people. Melted crayon colours, smell of spoiled food, heat beating down on the tympanum of asphalt, baking the apartment buildings. But the sight of children bursting through the walls, people living the good life on tiny balconies revived my spirits.

I enjoy the Fringe Festival because the venues are small, the plays short and intense with only a few actors. There is almost no distance between me and the stage so the world of the play surrounds me, pulls me in. Saw *Closet Land*, written by Radha Bharadwa, directed, produced and acted by Jill Sweetin. Intense, interesting, the connections drawn between state and personal authoritarianism not too didactic or simplistic. The childhood abuse subplot paralleled state torture without being forced and “closetland,” the woman’s childhood refuge was what gave her the strength to resist. Accused of disguising anti-government propaganda as a children’s story, the heroine’s bizarre interrogation becomes the courtyard in her struggle for freedom – and sanity. The saner she becomes, the madder the state.

The closet was richly depicted, the locked room in which she is tortured, the room in her childhood in which she was abused, and finally, the refuge, the source of the fantasies and interior imaginative worlds, which ultimately give her the strength to resist. Script very tight. Hieratic positions of power, Stark’s interrogator character counterposed with the writer’s abject positions on stage. Also good were the decrepit government issue props, the seedy desk, frayed briefcase, the institutional-green electric chair-like device. All in all a tight play, focused on its fraught issues. Domination, submission, the pain that resides within institutions; government institutions, family institutions. The link between state/citizen, adult/child.

June 16

Subscribed to a list on the Net: CREWRT-L (Creative Writing in Education). Crewtonia! I’ve been enjoying it immensely. I subscribed in digest format and it was confusing at first, like entering a party where people have already split up into groups and all well into their own conversations. After a couple of days of digests I managed to untangle the skeins of conversations. I’m starting to know some of the people, the themes, sub-plots, various perspectives. Just being on such a list can turn anyone into a creative writer, able to project any identity you want, any topic or story you find interesting. So far, I find a spirit of co-operation, a consensus-seeking atmosphere. Argumentative statements are qualified or defused with those little ASCII smiley or winky faces. People will often post messages to appease or play devil’s advocate.

So many interesting simultaneous conversations; RD Laing, poetic forms, use of “thee” and “thou,” grammatical use of gender-neutral language (one of the hotter topics). There are conferences, both virtual and real, reading tapes being sent between people, virtual parties, whimsy, playfulness and lots of poetry and talk of poetry. The list removes me from the parochial hothouse of the anglo writing clique here in Montréal. It is refreshing to hear about writing from people I don’t know, people who don’t teach at Concordia or write for *the Montreal Gazette*. No FEWQs or AEQs, QSPELLS or any other country clubs.

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Something posted by Kate Coles on poetry:

“... Poetry is the most precise possible expression of the relationship between our interior and exterior lives. In order to be so precise about such an impossibly complex and rich relationship poetry must employ the most muscular language available. By “muscular” I mean language that, at any given moment, does a number of things at once.

“Hence the emphasis in poetry on the figure of speech, which so often relies on turning one thing into another (metaphor being the most obvious example); on rhyme, in which one word aurally and visually contains another and so requires the mind to contain both words at once; and on rhythm, which often emulates the action of the poem, and which both propels the poem forward and disrupts its forward motion. Poets also often rely on words with more than one meaning, and, at their best, may rely on the whole history of a word’s meaning.

“In a good poem the various meanings evoked at any given moment refract into and inform the meanings at any other given moment in a sort of orchestration of language in which meanings can grow exponentially richer.”

-Kate C”

All of her posts are like this!

Another Crewton side-trip. Topic: what we keep in our pockets. I loved this response from Robin A. Kemp, who posts from Georgia State University: “Mezzuzah, prayer beads, ancient lucky coins, passports, sand from the desert.” I loved this. Mysterious, evocative.

June 24

Marsha and John invited us to Maine but we couldn't afford to go. We're meeting them at What's Your Beef in Burlington instead. I didn't miss going to Maine, though, because Gail and Ravil came to visit, and Fred made lasagna for dinner. Gail loved the house. The first thing she said was, "This is a real love nest."

We took them on the grand tour of the mansion. When I told Gail how all the rooms remind me of wonderful vacations we've taken, she knew what I meant. She could see it too. She picked out all the little things I love about the house. She lay down on the waterbed and we talked like sisters. She is still torn up inside over her youngest son, Ryan. He did move out, which was traumatic enough, but she's even more worried he's becoming a "user." This is especially painful considering what a good, protective, loving child he was. Natasha came and curled up on Gail. She said cats often resemble their owners. One of her friends has a great big pear-shaped cat. Natasha suited me because she was so pretty and elegant with her delicate features. Well, that made me purr!

Had our lasagna dinner with wine. Some gossip of course. Ravil is applying for Linda Ordogh's job at Health Sciences Library. I really hope he gets it because then he and Gail will stay in town. Linda is going to Harvard to study the History of Medicine and she got a sabbatical. We are all very happy for Linda; no one deserves it more. Unfortunately no good news about Louise, who is caught in some kind of spiral. According to Gail, she's probably dealing drugs now, or serving as some kind of go-between. Apparently she takes breaks and meets guys in vans in the alley outside of Howard Ross. Louise told everyone she had cancer but it mysteriously went into remission at the beginning of the summer. Then there's the time she came to work in a neck brace.

We thought Rocky was the crisis in her life and once she was rid of him she would be better, but she's digging herself in deeper and deeper. I'm really curious about this Professor Monte. Is she duping him? Is he part of it? Anyway, he didn't get tenure at McGill and is taking a position in Pakistan. Louise is (allegedly) going with him. Pakistan, eh? Kind of tempting to call Customs!

Louise is friendly and she has a vulnerability that makes her difficult to dislike. But she has become a lot harder than she was when I worked at Howard Ross. She used to come across as if she were play-acting, more of a “Can I play too, Spike?” But she has gone big-time and it’s difficult to see the small person who just wants to be liked by others, who used to lie and put up a front so we’d still be on her side. She doesn’t put on a front any more. Now she lives in a fantasy world and I don’t believe she can tell the difference between reality and fiction. She’s addicted to the excitement and is not longer content to just flirt with the drug culture.

Had a wonderful time with Gail and Ravil though. Even the house feels more special when someone notices the little things I love about it. And instead of moping over not going to Maine I got to see these two friends this weekend.

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To Burlington. Camped at Mount Mansfield. Lovely to hear the wind in the trees, the mesmeric foothills of Underhill, the cauldron of cloud and mist, the rushing creek, and all the green living things. Met Marsha and John and What’s Your Beef, then we convoyed back to our place where they stayed the night before going on to Kingston.

July 5

Jazz Festival time again. Montréal at its best, everyone in the streets, strolling, listening, greeting friends, dancing, all moving in rhythm with the music. A web-work of stages all clustered around Place des Arts. Such a great feeling to wander around the car-less, streets, drinking my beer, hearing interesting sounds everywhere I go. Rested on the bleachers to hear the George Robert Quintet and got caught in a cloudburst. Some people dashed to the shelter of a nearby Metro station. The rest of us sat huddled under umbrellas and the bleachers looked like a campground, umbrellas like tents.

The rain stopped, leaving a cool, luminous evening, my favourite kind of weather. And all the people you can meet. I saw Howard Gliserman and Joan Berryman almost walking side-by-side. Caught the Christine Raby band, which I enjoyed immensely. She's a small woman with a big rich voice and sang blues and French pop songs, which seemed to blend very well together. Klezmer music huge this year. The Flying Bulgar Klezmer Band, Klezmatiks, Shram Klezmer Band were all there. I liked how the Flying Bulgars incorporated a lot of jazz riffs into the music to create a cool hybrid.

More than anything I love just wandering through the crowds, hearing music everywhere as if transmitted from across oceans, from countries all over the world. The collage of sound and rhythm as I stand listening to one band and another starts up a block away.

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Crewton-l posting from John Gilgun re poetry industry vs Internet:

"I did notice that three of the people who seem to believe most wholeheartedly in the dynamics of the 'poetry industry' - the bureaucracy of it, the awards, the idea that 'good poetry' can be written by perhaps ten people in the world, nine of whom just happen to be at the conference – were either totally opposed to the Internet (to the point of being phobic about it) or unaware of it. Conversely, the two who seemed to believe in the democratization of writing were members of this list ...

"For me, the Net represents Breakthrough City! We are all poets here. And yet ... Across my democratic idealism falls the dread shadow of those who won the Googleheim and are 'in' and those who didn't, us less mortals who are supposed to sit in the audience and applaud our betters politely like good little boys and girls.

-JG"

July 10

Visited Linda Ordogh, one of Fred's colleagues at Health Science library. For all her new age beliefs she can't quite conceal her bitterness at McGill or anger over the way David and many others treated her. Linda is going to Harvard to study the history of medicine. She was also appointed "distinguished member" of the MLA (Medical Library Association), and has received no recognition for her accomplishments. I am over-the-moon happy for her. She deserves success. She's an underdog in the McGill system and that's because she is not a conventional librarian. Linda is dynamic, enthusiastic and not above getting out there to do fund-raising and mobilizing support. I'm sure others, such as David, see her as an upstart and a huckster, rather than a scholar.

I think it's difficult to be both a good scholar and a good manager and I feel a lot of sympathy for a lot of McGill librarians who are caught between the two. I do not ever want to be a manager, which is one of the reasons I decided not to enter the MLIS program. Dynamic people like Linda really suffer in this kind of bureaucracy. The talented, dynamic people always move on, leaving the system apparatchiks. Linda sees herself as an underdog at McGill, but I also sense this is a theme in her life. I think she's underestimated, not only by McGill, but also by her own family. It seems that Linda is considered "different" by her mother and sister.

Linda's apartment is a lovely oasis. Her furnishings are unconventional, individual, souvenirs from countries she's visited, collections reflecting her many interests. Yet there was a message in everything she showed us: her mother couldn't understand why she bought that set of dishes, her sister thought the fish chair and wavy lamp were weird. I think Linda's apartment is lovely and individual. Yet even in choosing furnishings for her apartment, Linda is being underestimated – hen-pecked! She said she had to listen to her inner voice and go her own way. She is one of these everyday secret heroines. It was also fun seeing her Star Trek program on the computer. Shine on, Linda Ordogh!

July 28

Sharon has a new man in her life. His name is Bill Knox. He's vice principal at one of the schools where she used to teach. I received a letter from her a couple of weeks ago, officially breaking the news. She sounded happy, not only happy but amazed as well, amazed by a happiness she never expected to find again. It was very touching.

"... I always told people that I didn't think I'd ever date again because I didn't believe I'd ever meet a man who could jump over all the hurdles I'd put in his path and who could accept me with all my heavy emotional baggage. Well, I certainly didn't believe it would come in the package of a 53 year-old former jock with a conventional twist on life. But it did. We get on surprisingly well and he is a very good man and he makes me laugh ... This is quite a change in life for me. I never thought it would happen again ... I think of this relationship as a blip on the screen of my singlehood. I don't mean I'm not serious about him, because I am. I mean I know this may not last forever, or even for very long with the 16 year age gap. But at least it's a bit of an improvement in life at the moment. More than I ever hoped for ..."

Now she and Bill have come for an over-night visit on their way to the Maritimes for vacation. I was surprised when Bill walked through the door. He looks nothing like Ernie and in spite of Sharon's description of him in her letter, I guess I still wasn't prepared. He is fifty-three and Sharon said he looks like the stereotype of a fifty-three year old vice principal. She's right about that! Fred was also a little surprised when he saw Bill. Then he said, "That was how Bill was supposed to look." Sharon described him exactly as he is and we both felt silly over our surprise.

We both liked Bill a lot. He is personable, friendly, not the kind of middleaged man who goes off to watch sports or just sits in the corner until he can make his getaway. This is, of course, how I feel when introduced to most middleaged men. We made lasagna and he was good company. He talked about his childhood and a lot about awkwardness, painful self-consciousness and humiliation. He also talked about how terrified he was at public speaking. He hasn't forgotten what it's like and it's made him humane about his own students. I was impressed by his compassion when he talked about teaching.

High school teachers are consigned to re-live high school for their entire working lives. Some teachers get pulled into it and act as if they're still high school students themselves; as cliquy, conventional, insecure and afraid of being alone as their students. But Bill seemed to have perspective on it and seemed quite astute about people. And besides, he knew Boris and Natasha were named after *Rocky and Bullwinkle* characters, and that Boris's full name is Boris Badenov. He was a big fan of the show. Maybe that's why Boris adored him. He curled up on Bill's chest the way he curls up on mine.

Bill is quite witty and he challenges Sharon, is not at all shy about arguing with her or expressing his opinions. Not a push-over! At one point she was expounding about Jewish lawyers and Bill said, "Wait a minute. You sound like Archie Bunker and you're supposed to be an ESL teacher." I know what Sharon means when she talks about that. If you don't know her and her way of classifying people, you could easily take it the wrong way. But it is good to see her being challenged, back in a give-and-take, push-pull situation where she has to explain her thinking. And Sharon seemed happy. Finally someone she could call "dear" again. She was softer, less brittle, more relaxed as she always is when she's around good friends or her budgie. Another interesting note: For years she's been describing herself as an introvert. Today she called herself an extravert.

Aug. 1

Met Patty at Central Station. She was visiting her brother in Québec City and had an hour or so before catching the train to Toronto. I always enjoy rambling around Central Station. The waiting area is now no smoking and so much less depressing. Hung around the portals leading down to the platform and watched people emerge from the underworld and there was Patty. We embraced. I'm always surprised by how small and delicate she is. She looked pixie-like, her red hair curling around her ears. We had coffee and talked.

She is still with Revenue Canada and likes her job because she gets to call people and help them with their taxes, inform them about things they can do. She's not an auditor and doesn't want to do that job. Although her contract was renewed, her job there isn't permanent and cut-backs are looming. She figures she should apply for next-level-up positions but they're all in Ottawa and she doesn't want to live there.

She's still paying off her student loan. I think I'm glad I went to school part-time while working. It took forever to finish my degrees but at least I'm not trying to get myself out of debt. We talked a lot more about work than about writing. She's finding it as hard to get motivated as I am although she is still much better than I am about sending work out and applying for grants. And all too soon I saw her off; another portal.

Aug. 5

We were on our way to Amir for showarma when we decided to visit the old 'hood and call on Joe and Sandra. While we were driving up Delorimier I saw movement on our old balcony and thought I saw a man beating a child. Discovering it was a dog didn't make me feel much better. We turned down Tillemont and I saw a ghostly face looking out our old living-room window, a young sad woman. I could see it in her face: abusive relationship, no money, at least one kid. Windows covered with bed sheets.

Joe and Sandra were home. For once Joe wasn't working and they gave us a warm hero's welcome. Joe and Sandra aren't pleased with the new tenants and Joe said he wasn't going to renew their lease. The 38 Special was gone, replaced by a new bar. Joe says this one's okay and not nearly as noisy. The sign is certainly more benign. No more neon guns. This one merely says, "Chez Paul," and looks like a genuine neighbourhood bar. The dépanneur is still a hub of activity. There was a drug bust in the neighbourhood. Joe said there were so many cop cars it looked like a movie dragnet then said these things happen everywhere, including the suburbs. He grew up in this neighbourhood, this building and I really like his loyalty.

We had a very nice visit with Joe, Sandra, Philip, Joeson, David and baby Justin in their narrow all-corridor apartment, mirror-image to ours. Everything in the old neighbourhood seemed long, narrow, vertical. The ruelles looked like corridors. So many people, so little space. Yet, as usual, I enjoyed the activity, the energy. Sandra has such a retentive memory. She recalled things about us and the cats that Fred and I had forgotten.

Aug. 27

World Film Festival. Saw *Kabloonak* at the Imperial. Delighted to see the Imperial Theatre is just like the Rialto, only in better condition with comfortable seats. *Kabloonak* was a beautiful film directed by Claude Massot, starring Charles Dance and Adamie Inukpuk. It's a joint Canada/France production with a Russian crew as well, since some of it was filmed in Russia. It was about British film-maker, Robert J Flaherty, who went to the Arctic and made *Nanook of the North*, which became known as the first true documentary. *Kabloonak* depicts the making of Flaherty's film, the hardship and stamina it took to make it. But most of all, I think it showed Flaherty's respect and affection for the Inuit people, especially his doppelganger Nanook, who was as single-minded in his pursuit of the hunt as Flaherty was in making the film.

The photography was beautiful and always related to the people living in it. The lunar landscape of the North, the different colours of the snow, its oceanic quality, seams of aqua-blue revealed like mineral deposits, the crystalline quality of ice and snow, variations of colour and shape. So pure, clear and uncompromising at times. The land is almost acoustic. You get the feeling if you dropped something on the floor of snow, colour would radiate from it. Radiance, resonance. Then the complete obliteration of the world in a sudden blizzard. Deep night sky reflected on snow. Glowing domes of igloos like satellite dishes in the achingly blue-white landscape, kerosene lanterns flickering as if signalling each other across the miles. The flexibility and simplicity of the sledges, beautiful design, every force evolves a form.

Charles Dance, who played Flaherty, reminded me of Colin Browne at times, the same kindness and willingness to observe and learn yet tempered with a certain tension. In Flaherty's case the tension lies between his understanding and affection for Nanook and his personal ambition to complete the film. Adamie Inukpuk played Nanook, a real man, a hunter, just as determined to win at the hunt and bring down his polar bear as Flaherty was to make his film. The way the two doubled each other, played on each other's obsessions was very well done. Nanook was humorous, moody, not unlike Flaherty, and it was interesting to see how the two both understood and mistrusted each other's intentions.

The film also caught the changing times very well. It did not have the static quality of a historical period piece. IMHO the most successful historical films are those which do not try too hard to be authentic in every detail. There were no polemics in *Kabloonak*, no noble savage overtones, no editorializing about the corrupting influence of the white man. These Natives were not primitives before Flaherty showed up with his camera. The children at the post reacted to his film and camera and phonograph records the way I would react to virtual reality equipment. Flaherty is neither Great White God or White Devil. Since this is a documentary about a documentary I wonder if this is how Massot sees the Inuit he is filming, or is this Flaherty's view of the Inuit, taken from the early 20th Century.

I knew the film would not come with a happy ending. It opens with Flaherty in a smoky bar, drinking himself into a stupor, then back three years earlier when his trip to the Arctic took place. Nanook of the North was a huge success from the time it came out. In the middle of his triumph, Flaherty receives a telegram that Nanook died of starvation due to a disastrous hunt. Flaherty is heartbroken. He walks to the theatre where Nanook is showing. There is a cardboard polar bear installed over the ticket booth and another cardboard cut-out of Nanook. All Flaherty is left with is a promotional image of his old friend, an image of a movie image. The art, the fiction and marketing is all that is left. Almost unbearably sad.

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Sunday morning, grey, autumnal, wind ransacking the trees. Spiders are taking over the world. The car is tied down by millions of gossamer cords. The plantain lilies look battered. Work is draining. I feel I hardly have any private time any more, my entire life is at Windsor Station. Weekends don't feel like a break any more. I worked full-time at McGill and never felt this way. Maybe it's because I actually have to work at CP. No night classes for me this year. I miss that outlet.

Sept. 1-5

Lunch at Place Ville Marie with Gail. Louise has left for Pakistan with Professor Monte. She is known there as “Mrs Monte.” Pakistan is a Muslim country so Louise and the professor are posing as husband and wife. I really cannot picture this relationship in that country. Howard Ross is looking for a replacement for Louise but I'm not applying. I'm not turning back. Life isn't ideal at HRoss either. Jane has returned from Systems and isn't happy about her return. Instead of talking about it honestly she has become more controlling, constantly pontificating and correcting everyone else. However, Gail adds she's been on Dorothy's back and we laughed over that.

**

Marsha and John arrived. They're staying chez nous overnight and tomorrow we're bound for Maine! Dinner at Romano's. I think the entire West Island congregates here. Romano's is a pizza place that expanded to serve a full menu of Italian food. Odd mix of serious restaurant and family pizza joint. It was a fixture when I lived in Elrond and visited Fred in Beaconsfield. It's still quirky. They still mix orders up, put green peppers on “no green peppers” pizzas and get the bills wrong, but Marsha and John seemed to like it.

I say “seemed” because it turns out that Marsha doesn't like Amelio's that much – she only pretended it was her favourite restaurant, for some reason. Why anyone would lie about liking a restaurant is mystifying to me, especially coming from Marsha, who can be so brutally honest. But our dinner at Romano's was pleasant. John is going through some upheaval at his work. The government is closing the women's penitentiary and they've let the head warden go. That means higher level people, including John (an accounting manager), are to take turns filling the position. John doesn't want the warden's position and has said so in his quiet stubborn way. Also, two women in his department are feuding. He hates this kind of thing but since he's their boss he has to deal with it.

Marsha and I went for one of our marathon walks along Lakeshore. She wrote a letter to Pat Murray saying she couldn't cope with her relationship with that bum from Florida, and couldn't pretend to want to see him. John signed the letter (John who hates conflict but never does anything he doesn't agree with) but Marsha took all the blame. Pat totally rejected the letter, is telling everyone Marsha dropped her as a friend.

But then as Marsha says, nothing good has ever come from one of her letters. We almost walked as far as downtown Dorval, if Dorval can be said to have a downtown. It truly is a suburb, no old town area like Lachine, Verdun or Pointe-Claire. Although we were walking along Lakeshore near the water, there were areas that seemed far from the water and the shadowy hollows, houses and yards disoriented us. There are also a couple of wide boulevards with very bright streetlights standing in rows, which seemed completely unfamiliar.

**

Through the Eastern townships. I don't know what it is about Magog but it always has a veiled, luminous look to it. As usual, Marsha brought bags of food and we munched all the way to the border. Always fun to list all our institutions at Customs; McGill, Queen's, Women's Pen and CP Rail. A blush of colour in the trees carpeting Vermont and into Maine. The strange mix of gentrification and shacks. Clam-shacks, lobster barns, the seafood industry, the scrappy, makeshift quality of a lot of the houses. Of course, the closer you get to Kennebunkport the more gentrified the state becomes. The industry is hidden behind the elegant walls of chic tourist restaurants. We were caught in the civic parade of traffic, which is always threading through Kennebunkport. The oddly sinister Wedding Cake house.

We stayed at Mrs Blake's cottages instead of Mrs Craig's Red Pines. These cottages were the strangest little dollhouses, sculpted out of a 1950s femininity. There's something frightening about how precisely the trivets are affixed to the walls, the frilled yellow rick-rack edging the windows, the yellowness of it. It's as if June Cleaver ran a military base. Mrs Blake's house is like one of her cottages, only larger, crammed floor to ceiling with gew-gaws, the kind of overstuffed claustrophobic interior Ruth Rendell describes so well. Decorated kleenex boxes, painted plate collection, poodle figurine collection, all infused with the stifling smell of cigarettes and toilet water.

Had our traditional lobster rampage at the Captain's Table. Marsha informed us she's pregnant. She hasn't had a drink all weekend and we were not surprised to hear the news. The docks at Cape Porpoise look cleaner. More sailboats tethered near the lobster boats.

Wandering along the beach at Olgonquit, feeling cool water on my feet. Since it was cool, most of the people huddled near the pier, looking like evacuees. This is definitely not Old Orchard Beach – a much more upscale crowd, lots of gays. Took the Marginal Trail and I was completely lost in the gorgeous lush gardens, the British fantasy world of this part of Maine, always in sharp contrast with the industrial towns that look like Trois-Rivières and the scrappy sights and sounds of real dock work, the fishing and lobster boats and the wilderness of rock, pine and shore, which seem to be off-limits to tourists like us.

Sept. 6-14

So many thoughtful posts on Crewton lately. This from Bill Church:

“We Americans in our haste to have everything available at all times, have caused companies to deprive their workers of any holiday at all. For instance, almost all the malls and retail outlets are open right now, as are restaurants, gas stations, theaters and many factories Somehow or other, either through lowered expectations and altered definitions of “necessities” or through better wages, families could survive on one member’s salary. I know from my personal family history that my folks did well when I was a baby by living on my dad’s income from a meat-packing plant. They owned a home and a new vehicle.

“Of course the meat-packing industry has fled our region, breaking the unions that negotiated the wages which made it possible for a family to live on one salary, and now the meat-packing plants are, with some regularity, fined for the use of illegal immigrants. And the people who once earned decent wages were replaced by people who would work for much less as the factories played games with their books and more vertical integration, almost the point of monopoly, overtook many segments of our country. By playing with books, the companies went into fake bankruptcies only to reopen under a new name, still owned by the same master company, but no longer having a contract with labor. This has become business as usual.

“As a result of undoing the collective right to bargain that FDR defended, we have a redistribution of wealth which has changed how we view all holidays. Walmart is a prime example. By hiring people for slave wages and convincing them they own a piece of the rock, Sam Walton built the greatest personal fortune in America. His employees, however, could qualify for food stamps. They are now told, even in tiny St Joe, to staff the store 24 hours daily, 7 days a week. The quality of their lives has diminished to serve the needs of the benefactors ie the Waltons, and the get-a-lifers who would frequent such places in the wee hours. For these people, this job may be better than no job, but barely ...

-Bill”

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From John Gilgun:

“Christmas is a special problem. This year I plan to fly to San Francisco for Christmas to be with my friends, all gay men, who constitute my SF alternate family. I hate the idea that at Christmas I am to be treated as some kind of poor relation, to be invited over in the evening for an hour perhaps, to prove how Christian and considerate some people can be. Like that poor Korean pursued through the streets in Iowa City each Thanksgiving and dragged back to the Unitarian Church and stuffed with turkey to prove how benevolent the church-goers really are. (Their pictures appear in the paper the next day with the poor Korean to prove the point.) Is it true that holidays were invented by the Marquis de Sade, Torquemada, Attila the Hun? Ivan the Terrible? Help.

-Scroogeboy”

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From Al Cardinale:

“John ... Most corporate jobs stink. I get paid relatively well, average for the job, but the work is meaningless to me. Most important, I am meaningless to them. Social responsibility is not in the cards for American companies. Sure they say they are responsible ... their ‘benefits’ (which are really chains that bind one to a job, not at all liberating or progressive) fall away from the unproductive. If you can’t make the number then you can’t have the services ...

“I feel as if my soul is pulled from my flesh every morning. There is no joy or happiness, no fulfillment ... only the temporary fix of receiving a paycheck to feed commercial mentality. Certainly we need and desire things, but we have run amuck in our consumerism. There is no soul in plastic parts, and they can’t deliver any real satisfaction to anyone.

So you are right, we drink; we eat; we speed; we get high; we stay up late to avoid the onset of morning, and then one day we realize we bought into the wrong program. I am stuck here for now, but I count every second that leads me from this mess ... probably to a less economically satisfying position, but I need some soul in my work. I can’t imagine going to my grave with working in this foul company being my life achievement ... shit, I need a drink now ... and to drive too fast. Actually, what I need is to go back to the woods to stay.

-Al”

You don’t get this in newspapers or magazines. These are the real voices of my generation, not the “boomers” who came before us. I finally hear from those “tail-enders,” just like me with our millions of contract jobs, our dearth of real prospects, our deeper subjugation to corporations. Etc.

Sept. 10

Neighbours! I am so happy that the people who moved into Mrs Ewan’s house across the street from us have turned out to be so congenial. Mrs Ewan had lived in the same house since the 1950s, when her house was the model, or showplace of the neighbourhood. I used to call her Miss Daisy because I always saw her standing at the curb, elegant in her black winter coat, waiting for someone to pick her up. There were always people coming to her door, relatives, delivery trucks, a Sealtest truck. The Langills told us her husband died a long time ago and she continued living in the house, raising her children by herself, long before single-parent families were common. Fred’s mother knows Mrs Ewan, and Bob Langill’s parents, who live up the street.

Bob Langill is our next-door neighbour. He is a hail-fellow-well-met and has lived in this neighbourhood all his life. His parents still live up the street. He wears his high school jacket. He knows everything about everyone on the street. Has followed his father's footsteps into a vet practice. It is easy to see him as a suburban cliché but this is a man who whistles when he comes home from work, a man whose young children call "Bye Daddy!" from the window. His wife, Wendy, is the same way, friendly, always somewhere on the street talking to someone.

Bob and Wendy gave a neighbourhood get-acquainted soirée for all the new people on the street; us, J-P and Christine who have moved into Mrs Ewan's house and another couple two houses up from Bob, Mike and Josée-Anne Samson. Very pleasant. Beer, wine, barbecued hotdogs and hamburgers. We all talked about renovations, what the previous owners had done to our houses and of course *spiders*. I can't get over how many people have stayed here within these few blocks. In some ways the West Island is like a large ethnic community. Even J-P and Christine both grew up on the West Island and went to the same school, although they didn't get together until much later. J-P is an ambulance driver for Urgence Santé, and Christine works in human resources for a large company. The group split at dinner time. The younger people ate together and the older neighbours formed a group. Always interesting to see where the split in a group will occur. Sometimes it's French-English or male-female. Tonight it was age.

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Fred and I went for a walk and on our way back we saw Ron and Carol Miller sitting on their front step with a cup of coffee and their big Maine Coon cat beside them. We stopped to talk and I felt so peaceful. The leaves are starting to turn, giving everything a warm glow, a feeling of intimacy like lamp light in the evening. Ron, who sells equipment to the railways, couldn't stop talking about the cat. He had always thought of himself as a dog person and seemed a little ashamed of himself for falling in love with this big regal cat, which he got through Bob. Moments like this make me re-think some of my preconceptions about suburbia. There are decent good-hearted people here, living their lives. It's not a John Updike nightmare of "swinging couples" or Stepford Wives, or even the claustrophobic world of the *Wonder Years*.

Sept. 12

Provincial election. Torrent of people leaving work at 4:00. Train crammed. There's always such an exuberance about an election afternoon in Montréal. For me the election was between the weaselly bureaucrat, Daniel Johnson (Liberal) and the very patriarchal Jacques Parizeau (Molière's bourgeois gentilhomme). There seems to be a tendency in Québec to revert back to a particular kind of old-fashioned authoritarian politician. Lucien Bouchard springs to mind. Jacques Parizeau is exactly that kind of politician. His eyes have a mischievous twinkle. He deals with stupid media questions with a shrug, a quip, a put-on buffoonery; a benevolent father figure who sets his power in buffoonery and bonhomie. He, the Parti Québécois candidate sits very comfortably in the armchair of power, fire crackling, brandy snifter in hand, portrait of Queen Mum behind him. Johnson, on the other hand, looks like a nervous bean-counter, the little man in Profit Analysis who supplies the figures to the company terminator.

You can see so much in Parizeau's gestures, in the responses he gives to reporters, which always imply they are silly children who have stayed up past their bed times (can't blame him for that). I am convinced Parizeau will win and he will be bringing all of this into dealing with the Native peoples, multiculturalism, the place of Montréal in his vision of the new (old) Québec. I am convinced he will win because he is the patriarchal figure who keeps Québec in the past but also preserves its uniqueness. People here know him, the way they will never know a functionary like Johnson, the way people will always support the company president while loathing the mid-level manager. People recognize Parizeau was born to power, and will accordingly put him there. There is no way this man will lose to a Johnson here in Québec.

**

The election came out almost exactly as I predicted. The PQ won. Most of Montréal went Liberal. That jackass Richard Holden lost in Verdun. A predictable election, an old team rejected, a new one elected with some reluctance. The irony of a team of old politicians like Parizeau, Camille Laurin and others being elected under a campaign of "change." But I guess the Clinton victory has ensured all elections will pay lip service to "change," no matter how old-hat the candidates may be.

The anglo media, as usual, is obtuse, irrelevant, scare-mongering. Since the PQ had not won as big as the first polls had indicated, *the Gazette* et al have decided this is a defeat. They are claiming the Liberals and Johnson scored big. Constant spewing of Orwellian moral victory talk and constant repetition of how the PQ out-performed the Liberals by only .3% of the vote. In 1976, the Péquistes were elected with 41% of the vote. This was considered a resounding victory. The anglos hung their heads, blubbered and shuffled up the 401. In 1994, instead of fading away because of worries over the economy, the PQ has actually increased their strength by three percentage points. Given the economic climate, this is hardly a defeat, moral or otherwise. I am sick of the anglo media and its platform of moral victory, constantly treating us like juveniles who need constant placation. Best moment of the whole election: Parizeau *growled* during his acceptance speech.

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From a Crewton-L posting by John Gilgun:

“All – Only the dead and dying / In my little town. How many of the rest of you live in sick towns and how do you cope with it as literate, creative, intelligent, well people? My boss called me into her office yesterday and asked why I didn’t respond to a message she’d sent out asking if we were going to turn out for a meeting at the local public library to protest the fact that some local idiot wants to ban *The Joy of Gay Sex*. I told her I had received her message but that I had wiped it out of my mind. “It’s how I’ve survived here for 22 years. I don’t really live here. ... I won’t sacrifice one second of my peace of mind to respond to what some local fool with a tenth grade education has decided is a worthwhile way to waste his and other people’s time.”

Sept. 25

Saw *Child Murders* at the Cinéma de Paris. Hungarian by Ildihó Szabó. She held the story in her mind for 15 years until she graduated film school. She wrote the script in 1984 and eight years later learned she won “Best Director of a Feature Film” award. Zsolt is a resourceful 12 year-old boy who cares for his grandmother who once was a stage/cabaret actress.

Zsolt maintains her fantasy to get her up in the morning, and it is the fantasy that gives her life enough meaning for her to carry on. He pretends he is her stage manager and she is in her dressing room in a grand theatre. Every day she sings her song and Zsolt sternly tells her the show must go on. Even as he applies stage makeup to her face the camera is gentle on her, fluid and soft, preserving her youth and dreams.

Beautiful and riveting from the opening scene of water to the abandoned rail cars to the Mordor of the power plant. It was like walking into a gallery and seeing beautifully composed black-and-white still come to life. A ghostly quality. This gorgeous hieratic photography gave the film an eerie calm, again, a little like being in a gallery. Intensity was maintained by long extreme closeups, skewed angles, cropped heads, drama of light and shadow. The night scenes made me think it was being filmed underground, miners, mining. I also found myself thinking of monuments, pyramids.

The review I read *the Mirror* compared this film to recent American movies about serial killers (Oliver Stone et al). Another blurb about the film indicated it was about a “bad seed” who decides to kill, for no apparent reason. The film itself seemed to imply this through its ending. But I couldn’t see it that way. The boy was on his own, caring for his grandmother and Julie, the pregnant gypsy girl. I saw him as harassed beyond endurance by the horrible Ibo Trattler and I felt no qualms when Zsolt pushed her into the Danube. Yet Zsolt ends up on trial and there is a *Crime and Punishment*-like confessional. The film’s true ending for me was a freeze-frame of Zsolt with tears streaming down his cheeks – the only time in the film his composure breaks and he is allowed to be a child, and be seen as a child.

Oct. 2

Pleasant autumn afternoon. Brunch at the Croissant de lune, and then to *The Cement Garden* at the Cinéma de Paris. Warm enough to sit out on the terrasse and drink my café au lait and it felt as if I was on vacation in Paris, or Lunéville. It’s the kind of day when you notice little things, like the play of light on a dormer window.

I found myself gazing at the tinted windows of the Grand Café, thinking how it's a blend of Paris and Québec; Paris on the outside and a tougher Québec on the inside, like the other dark neighbourhood bars. Leaves clutter the streets in all colours and shapes. Sunlight catches the crimson leaves so some pulse with light while others are a shadowy red. Vines of intense red spray over walls, twine around telephone poles, fuses which have just been lit.

The Cement Garden, written and directed by Andrew Birkin was excellent but I was quite bemused by why the theatre was full of single men. Men just kept making their way down the aisles and sliding into the middle. By the time the previews played it looked like a porno theatre. The suburb in the film looked like an evacuated nuclear testing site, a drastic Tarkovsky landscape. From the kids' school uniforms to the cement garden, a grey-blue tinge pervades. Brick, rubble and flat stretches of cement, empty roads and breakers of rubble. I was struck by the the sci fi-fairytale house isolated from the world.

Andrew Robertson stars as Jack, the 15 year old obsessed with himself, a sci-fi novel and his older sister Julie. It's an excellent depiction of adolescence. There's the gloomy room, the dirty kitchen, the sick passive mother, the grubby household knick-knacks that have just accumulated unmoored to any particular time and place. The boredom and isolation, the alienation from the parents. The flux, fluidity of adolescent is also very well portrayed, genders that haven't set yet, the androgyny of Jack and Julie.

The power dynamics that exist in the family unit were also very well done. Julie, the oldest, was not conventionally attractive but she's the oldest, has power, status, mystique because she is the first to develop sexually. Like Anaïs Nin's rendition, the incest took place in a closed world, an inner prison where there was no escape. By the time the incest scene takes place, the outside world has already disappeared for these characters. They are no longer seen on their way to school. The world is stripped until it is reduced to the inside of the house, and then the bedroom.

Oct. 3

Went to hear David Lyon talk about liturgy and cyberspace at the McGill all-purpose chapel. Lyon is a committed christian, a fey British academic with a full black beard and domed Martian forehead. He subtitled his talk, “Jesus in Disneyland” and started with some of his impressions of D-land as a cartoon Third Reich. I could have listened to that all night.

-Society’s focus on fun, spectacle. We are all seeing the world as tourists, purchase as consumers. Consumerism now a world in itself, mutually supportive with computer technology.

-”We now have to continue to dream knowing we are dreaming” - Nietzsche

Lyon drew a sharp binary opposition: Liturgy – authority, continuity, roots, city of foundations, God. Cyberspace – exuberance, spontaneity, rootlessness, nomadic, anarchic, man as god. I would argue that although cyberspace may be all those things, there is nothing anarchic or nomadic about getting there. The programmer of sys op is god not the individual trying to navigate through a created world.

He said some interesting things about liturgy, though and it’s clearly the area he knows best. Liturgy – a context used to solemnize a marriage, baptize an infant. Forever. Lifelong covenant. Prayer, which proceeds the opening of the House of Holy. Only certain people, often ordained are allowed to hold liturgical service, only certain things are allowed to be said. Everything is meant to be said in unison with others – affirmation through the group. Liturgy points to purpose, refers to reality outside us and is greater than we are. It is meant for humans to share in the divine. The word made flesh.

He was not nearly as good on cyberspace and he didn’t seem to have that much experience with it. His view was clichéd. Ours is an electronically mediated society. My question is how is that mediation different from liturgy? Both are heavily mediated, collective spaces, worlds that have already been created for us by unseen powers. He said cyberspace originally grew out of and celebrated as outgrowth of industrial progress and there are no principles or limits in cyberspace. He has obviously never been flamed on an Internet list! If anything there are too many principles.

Almost everything he said about cyberspace seemed second-hand, not based on any kind of personal experience or research. He called virtual reality “solipsistic self-centredness.” He also said “identity is no longer given by family name.” This is something I like. The address header is fractured, pieces of your name split by punctuation with the institution by which you are associated. Your institution and geographical location is as important (and people love to speculate on these things) as the family name. But how is this anarchic? How does this remove identity? Without an affiliation with some institution, whether it be public or private, you can’t even get a password to cyberspace.

It was during Q&A where Lyon revealed how little he really does know cyberspace. Someone in the audience challenged him in a long prepared treatise on cyberspace, which covered a lot of my questions. Lyon backtracked and said he was only trying to communicate the notion of cyberspace to people who have little experience outside of some e-mail relationships and that the questioner could be right! Such a disingenuous back-track when his whole talk was conservative, religious and set up to compare cyberspace negatively with the concept of liturgy.

**

More interesting and fun is Umberto Eco on the MacIntosh, DOS, Catholics and Protestants.

“Insufficient consideration has been given to the new underground religious war which is modifying the modern world ...

“The fact is that the world is divided between the users of the MacIntosh computer and users of MS-DOS compatible computers. I am firmly of the opinion that the MacIntosh is Catholic and that DOS is protestant. Indeed, the MacIntosh is counter-reformist and has been influenced by the ‘ratio studiorum’ of the Jesuits. It is cheerful, conciliatory, it tells the faithful how they must proceed step by step to reach – if not the Kingdom of Heaven – the moment in which their document is printed. It is catechistic: the essence of revelation is dealt with via simple formulae and sumptuous icons. Everyone has a right to salvation.

“DOS is Protestant, even Calvinistic. It allows free interpretation of scripture, demands difficult personal decisions, imposes a subtle hermeneutics upon the user, and takes for granted the idea that not all can reach salvation. To make the system work you need to interpret the program yourself: a long way from the Baroque community of revellers, the user is closed within the loneliness of his own inner torment.

“You may object that, with the passage to Windows, the DOS universe has come to resemble more closely the counter-reformist tolerance of the MacIntosh. It’s true: Windows represents an Anglican-style schism, big ceremonies in the cathedral but there is always the possibility of a return to DOS to change things in accordance with bizarre decisions; when it comes down to it, you can decide to allow women and gays to be ministers if you want.

“And machine code, which lies beneath both systems? Ah, that is to do with the Old Testament and is Talmudic and cabalistic ...”

I can picture the Mac as a Catholic church, the high arched ceiling, the ritual, the space of it. To me, Windows is syncretic Catholicism. Grass-roots, pagan. Windows is the neon statue of Jesus in its little shrine, the Ste-Marie-de bain. Windows is Jesus and Elvis side by side. The Mac is formal, Windows is pop culture, full of unsolved mysteries and UFOs.

**

Another voyage to Crewtonia. Ivan Vasilev is a character who has recently shown up on the list. There has been a thread lately about how we’re all characters on the list, personae, revealing whatever identity we want through e-mail. Some people have speculated that Ivan is fake, a completely invented persona. Al Cardinale came out and speculated that “Ivan” is really a computer geek, complete with pocket protector who gets on the Net, fires off a few rounds to agitate everyone and then retreats back to his computer lab. Whoever he may be, Ivan is a contradictory character. He says he is Bulgarian, he seems to be quite young and does know a lot about computers. He’s aggressive with a manic adversarial wit, thin-skinned, responds to any mention of himself. He has a scattershot, vivid, sometimes hilarious way with words. He sends inflammatory posts then backs away from them, claiming all he wants to do is love everyone!

He is always talking about zen – seems to have studied it at one point. Bulgarian but somehow connected to Tennessee Tech, and a fan of Jane Siberry! To me he seems a lot like Ed Singer. Singer could be aggressive, confrontational, yet seemed to have no idea he was like that.

Oct. 20

Our clients at CP are so much nicer than the clientele at Howard Ross. There is a CP culture and although it's an old-boy WASP bastion there are good things about life inside the bastion. There's a courtesy, a protocol, a manner most of our clients have when dealing with the library. They respect it. When I send my my little recall messages I usually get an apologetic message in return, if not a thank-you for the reminder. I have a couple of regulars who even insist I stamp the journal so they'll remember to return it. Jim Scott, who always takes out the PC Magazines is a good example of our clientele.

He looks like the most button-down WASP you could imagine, always in jacket and tie, shirt buttoned up to his chin. I can't guess how old he is. But he always has something pleasant to say. When I was sick back in May, he seemed genuinely concerned that my cold wasn't going away. Today we talked about Halloween. He asked if I was dressing up. I said I might dress as a witch. He shook his head and said that was too big a stretch.

Véronique and I had a good talk about CP culture one afternoon. When she first started she felt she was entering enemy territory and she's come to feel the same way about CP as I do. She also said she was sure CPL would be her downfall when she started. This might explain why she can be so stressed sometimes. Probably still needs to prove herself as a French woman in this most British-empire of workplaces.

**

As for the merger, the tables seem to have turned. Merger talks broke down between CP and CN (surprise surprise) and now CP has officially offered to purchase CN's eastern operations for \$1.4 billion. Tweedle-dum and Tweedle-dummer?

**

Some fun pieces from the Sept/Oct *Windsor World*. Vaults used to exist below Windsor Station, before construction on the new Forum. These vaults consisted of 4 foot thick walls and steel-girdered ceilings. As long as the Soviets attacked at lunch hour, a few CP employees might have survived. A memo from April 1951:

“Any atomic attack is not expected to be prolonged, so that the vaults would be used to give temporary shelter only. As soon as the all clear is given and the area found to be non-radioactive people will be moved back again to carry on with their tasks.

-Inspector JC Machan

Department of Investigation”

And in the same issue, another vault story, written by Robert Parent of Archives. This occurred when the Occupational and Environmental Health vault was being emptied. I always knew WS had skeletons in the closet!

“[We] were in the OEH vault when we unexpectedly came across a well encased human skeleton. The bones were all attached as skeletons are when used for medical purposes. As the Angus employees rotated on and off duty regularly, there were many occasions when the new guys on call were not aware of what was in that particular vault. And only too soon someone would let out a scream and come running out, pale as a ghost (excuse the expression) and shaking like a leaf. This went on for as long as the skeleton remained in the vault. Bones was eventually moved to U de M.”

Oct. 25

Went out after work with Véronique. She said I should take her out for a red wine (or two). I readily agreed as she is one person I would love to see more of outside of work. We went to L'Actuelle and had a lovely red wine. Interesting blend of personal and work-related conversation. She also finds a tension in our department between the progressive people like herself, Carol and me, and the Jurassic Park group: Betty, Heather and Ginette. Elise is alone in the middle. We had fun dividing the library into geographic regions: Elise's lair, Jurassic Park (cataloguing and technical services) and the Bermuda Triangle (Ginette's periodicals).

Véronique said when she first started she cared about what Heather and Betty thought and now she doesn't. They are too set in their ways and seem to be working against doing the things needed to keep our department alive. We talked about politics. I said I was frustrated at always having to be in some kind of anglo camp here; the English assume I'm like them and all I care about are language laws. Véronique said she gets the same from her side. We both voted for the PQ for the same reasons; social services and health care. The Liberals have a terrible record on both of these issues. The only difference is she's encouraged to vote for the PQ while I don't dare admit it.

I do so enjoy talking to her. She's intelligent, witty, stimulating. She was at her most charming tonight, made it seem as if she was listening to every word I said, like I was the most important person in the world that evening. It's not just an act. She really does have this side to her and she shows it when she likes you. She has another side too, the tense Torquemada side that comes out at work. This side is just as real. It's almost like dealing with a split personality. We had our wine and I was reaching to pay when she stopped me and paid. I wasn't sure if I should have insisted. We went up Stanley to a restaurant in the Cour Montréal. Very pleasant with a Parisien quality. Then I spilled red wine on her. I was mortified but she was so gracious. Her face didn't even tighten. We took a taxi back to the West Island.

**

Came home from work and found a birthday card and letter from Val. Valerie Vail. I sent her a Christmas card with our new address and phone number. I can't remember what I wrote but I did say I missed her. I didn't get a response and I gradually forgot about it – until tonight.

“Dear Les

It's been a long time, but sitting in a café in the market listening to bluesy music caused time to telescope backwards in a pleasant / alarming way. As you said in the card you sent last year (I still have it) I miss you too. I keep tripping over cards and letters you sent me ... they're like snapshots of another time!

“I know we can’t go back so many years but I’d really like to see if there is still something we can build on to make a new friendship. Perhaps there has been too much water under, over and around the bridge but I’m pretty sure that these flashes are not just nostalgia. Nostalgia is not what it used to be!

“I miss the strawberry scented kerosene talks, the silly jokes and a feeling of having or being a close friend ... I’ve changed a lot and some ways hardly at all. I’m just not sure which is which right now. I often wonder about you – not you and Jim or you and Fred or you and the gang, just you ... the Cosmic Batt. Our friendship was the bitter and the sweet, but it was a good journey for its time. ‘The road goes ever on and on ...’ ‘I’d really like to walk with you again, that is if you’d like to walk with me. ‘You know where and who I am.’”

She wrote this note in the card:

“Dear Bats

“I won’t ask you to excuse the rather strange tone of this card ... It’s what’s been in my heart since I got your note and my pen just won’t write any other way. What I’m trying to say is if you want to check out the vibes, I’m game ... We first met in a massive auditorium 18 years ago ... want to try it again?? No holds barred, no pregnant pauses, just two people looking for common ground. What do you say? You took a chance, so am I ... This is from my heart.”

And she signed it in runes. I can’t get over how much it sounds like one of her letters from the old days. Same pen, calligraphy and rune sealing the envelope. She wrote part of the letter out on a diary page – the same kind of diary I write in. I read the letter and cried. I went about my business crying the whole time. I went for a long walk by the water, sat on a rock and continued crying. So many things: the market in Ottawa, Old Montréal, the brasserie, buskers, Drags, antiquing along Notre-Dame. I have missed her, friend of my youth, my heart, and of all the people who have come and gone in my life, Val is the one I’ve thought, regretted and cared most about.

Oct. 31

Ventured to Ray Beauchemin-Denise Roig's Urban Wanderers reading series on St-Laurent.

Tonight was devoted to ghost stories, including Scott Lawrence, Ann Diamond, Trevor Ferguson and the ubiquitous Anne Dandurand. A pleasant way to spend Halloween. The bar on St-Laurent was cozy with a floor that looked like it was made of stone, with leaves strewn about. Little pumpkin candles. Dropping in on the neighbourhood cavern. Ray was dressed as a banana republic dictator and Denise as a geisha. Ray came up to me and said, "Where are you? We wanted to reach you but we don't have your fucking phone number. No one does. Karen doesn't have it. Concordia doesn't have it." I admitted that I had moved and forgot to inform a lot of people. He took my number to include me in next year's Urban Wanderers series.

A costumed Scott Lawrence read something from an anthology, and he reads very well. He obviously feels badly about some of the criticism he took for *Missing Fred Astaire*, said he came in costume to hide himself from the critics. Both *Hour* and *Mirror* denigrated his "tired, middleaged white boy characters." Trevor Ferguson sounded like an evangelist in the cadences of his sentences, the way he emphasized certain words. Ann Diamond said she didn't have anything prepared and rambled about some episodes in her life while living in Hamilton. I admired her courage in being able to stand up in front of an audience and wing it. She wore a cat suit and munched something out of a cat food box. She's tall like Jane and looked endearingly young and gawky in the suit.

Nov. 1

Won cheap tickets to see Cirque du Soleil's *Saltimbanco*. This was an exclusive performance for CPR employees at the Angus Shops. As soon as I walked into the building I felt I had entered a hazy twilight world with familiar figures from CP appearing as if I were dreaming them. Someone called to me and when I looked over I saw Isabel Bliss's face appear in this dream-light. The show, of course, was marvelous. Creativity, imagination in every detail; music, set design, costumes as well as the performances. Wondrous acrobatics.

Saltimbanco was hieratic, a court peopled with androgynous Tarot card figures – the court of Louis XIV mixed with the Orient. Like the Tarot, you don't know exactly where the figures and symbols come from but they feel mysterious, ancient and powerful. But it was a little disorienting to be caught up in this world of the imagination while sitting among colleagues and clients. This was one time not to complain about louts in the audience.

Nov. 3-4

On the road to Daytona Beach with Marsha and John. Interstate world. Day 1: Montréal to Scranton PA. Large drab huddle of houses in Pennsylvania, barn-shaped, inflated octagons. Poconos surrounding us like a dark fortress, road slicing deep and narrow through strata of rock. Industrial country; mining, farming. Rugged and austere. I could imagine moonshine in those woods. Pennsylvania Deutsch (Dutch) territory. Lord's Valley, PA. Shared the road with both God and England. God is a Guaranteed Overnight Delivery truck. England is also a truck with a huge red cab, crest on the container and it just said "England." Signs appeared at the sides of roads like dream symbols. Gas-food-lodging, Denny's, the EconoMotel, the Motel 6.

We stayed at an EconoMotel on the outskirts of Scranton near a postal depot and some other strange compound. Ate at Valentino's a strange restaurant connected to the motel. A watery pastel-coloured disco-palace with light sequinning the windows, plush hearts mounted on the walls. The food was surprisingly good. Rather disconcerting to find this disco pick-up palace in the middle of nowhere, off a highway in the midst of trucks and industrial compounds. John was particularly bemused by the giant screen projecting a silent football game in the midst of all this lavender and aqua.

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From Scranton to Gold Rock, North Carolina. Warm day. Slow flowing river under an arched railway bridge reminding me of Florence, Italy. Crossed the Mason-Dixon line. Silvery cotton fields. Virginia: rolling hills, syrupy orange and amber leaves. We had turned the clock back to earlier autumn weather.

In spite of the peaceful rolling countryside, Virginia was where we started seeing NRA and pro-gun bumper stickers, billboards which ordered us to “Vote for Ollie North for Senate,” and later, a huge billboard that said, “Don’t Vote for Oliver North That Son-of-a-Bush.” Everywhere reminders of the upcoming election and clues as to how it will swing. Every candidate we have heard on the radio, between our mix-tapes, wants to incarcerate people. Republican or Democrat – lock them up! Tobacco ads everywhere, Virginia cigarettes.

Heading to Richmond, which seemed like the industrial centre of the south. Factories, pulp-and-paper stench, refineries. The interstate bisects the country ’bus it its own world and you only get hints at what state, what geography you’re in, tiny shifts in housing style, vegetation only appearing in the margins. And signs, always the signs standing on stilts: gas-food-lodging, Denny’s, Shoney’s, Hampton Inns, Scottish Inns, a bizarre series of billboards for a “South of the Border” theme park.

Micro changes in climate and vegetation appear like reality breaking into a dream. Started seeing Spanish moss on trees, woody areas that looked ropier, vinier. Fewer signs of autumn, leaves remaining green with only the crowns of some trees turned orange. Bearded branches, Spanish moss like veils, long trailing sleeves. The Spanish mos and furry tree trunks fill in the space of a woods, make it appear denser, more Gothic, less familiar. These aren’t the woods of my childhood. Hint of bayous.

Pine woods of the Carolinas. Tall pines with very long soft green needles like big car wash brushes with cones the size of coconuts. Soft white sandy soil like talcum powder. Spent the night in Gold Rock.

**

Sandy red soil in Georgia. There would be places where the earth was dry then two feet later trees were growing out of murky water. Stopped for breakfast at a truck stop and it was like leaving the daylight world for Twin Peaks. It was a David Lynch world of labyrinthine corridors, dark smoky *Blue Velvet* rooms, TV light flickering in the corner, figures moving in the dark as if under sea. Trucker lounges. Shower and laundry rooms for the truckers and a sign posted on one of the bathrooms said it was reserved for “lady truckers and ladies travelling with the truckers.”

Bulletin boards haunted by missing person announcements. Also featured radio call signals, buy-and-sell opportunities. All in stifling dark brown and muddy yellow. We ate our breakfasts surrounded by drowsy truckers. A very fragile young woman held her coffee cup in both hands, smoke trailed out of her nose and mouth as if it was too painful to exhale. She was accompanied by a beaten-down older man. The only colour in the room came from a pink and blue juke box which contained country music and Janet Jackson (described by one radio station deejay as being “the only normal Jackson”). Excellent breakfast.

Decisive shift in geography as soon as we reached Florida. Sub-tropical. Along the sides of the interstate the wooded areas became dense, full of shapes, textures I have never seen before, curious shadows, vines scribbling down the trees and along the ground. At a rest stop in Florida, just before Jacksonville my eyes finally focused on the palm trees, fan-shaped palmettos, trees full of birds and blooms and I realized I was hot. We were definitely in Florida.

**

Daytona Beach. The Sandcastle motel is hidden, nestled in the surreal strip that follows the beach. Vision filled with sand drifting across the road like powdered sugar, high rise condos in white and pastel colours, baby-aspirin pink. The style evokes the late fifties-early sixties and I can imagine Ricky Ricardo pounding out “Babaloo” in the Sea and Surf Hotel. It’s a hallucination. Motel colonies, cliff-dwellings. Our hotel room full of surf sound. First walk along the beach at night. Magic borders of foam, constant roar of the ocean, ghostliness of the pier, feel of silken-wet sand on my feet, water birds high-stepping along the shore. Most of all, now and forever, the ocean itself, disappearing into darkness.

Nov. 6

Sound of waves. Going south is like going back in time, back through the stages of autumn to summer again. Last evening it was so warm it was hard to believe that it’s actually autumn here just as it is back home and it starts getting dark at six pm. You expect the light to linger until 9. Adds to the surrealism.

Early morning power-walkers and joggers across the frieze of beach, the shining strip where sea meets land. The rock lobsters are already out on their poolside ledges, touching up their tans. These are the first snow-birds, already broiled in sun. Licence plates read New York, New Jersey, etc. They seem to move from room to pool to beach.

Sun shining on the cubes, planes and angles of the motel. The Sandcastle is snug, hidden by the condo colonies and their pink walls, teal roofs and phony crests. It feels like a hideaway. The prevalence of white and pastel says “beach,” reflecting the minimalism of sea and sand. Windows and doors appear as if scooped out of sand; natural erosion. We spend so much time in Canada trying to evoke Florida and California it’s interesting to see that Florida does the same thing. We evoke Florida, Florida evokes Hawaii and the Polynesian islands with thatched roofs, huts, etc. We are all a chain of dreams. Even Florida isn’t Florida. I wonder who Hawaiians dream they are?

Every little corner is different from Montréal. Vacant lots full of cacti and the kinds of plants that can exist only in greenhouses up north. Gardenias, which look like crepe paper prom flowers grow in every garden. Lizards and salamanders streak into their bunkers. Palm trees in abundance, some formal with shaved trunks, occasionally spot-lit as they were in California. Unlike California, they grow wild and languish in vacant lots, part of the roadside scrub. I get the idea that Florida would be very wild and frightening if it wasn’t developed at all. There’s a dark undertone here, something much wilder than anything near San Francisco. The scrub is dense with Spanish moss, prickles, burrs, the spikes of palmettos and cacti, tiny razored leaves, carnivorous grass, the kinky branches of liveoak and cypress, furred with vines, haunted by spectres of Spanish moss.

Florida has a fierce edge. I don’t know the true name of this wilderness. Not a forest, nor a jungle. In-between. Scrub is the word I hear. The power-walkers thin out, replaced by truly enormous people and cars. Cars may drive on the beach during the day. Two-lane traffic on a beach. The reason is that Daytona Beach was created to be the all-American beach when cars were god. They’re not allowed to drive on the beach at night, however. Always this go forward-jerk back tension in the States. Push to develop then look back nostalgically and try to return to what was already lost. Here they allow cars on the beach but charge a toll and ban them after dark.

Pelicans on beach surveillance, pterodactyls riding the sky. Also herons, even buzzards. Nothing is better than swimming in the ocean, abandoning yourself to a force far beyond your control, the feeling of being borne away by waves, imagining being carried out to sea, undertow cutting away the earth beneath your feet. Stand backward and you can see and feel the sand, the texture of grits moving under your feet, drawing you into the ocean. Then a dip in the quiet blue motel pool.

**

Grocery shopping with John and was touched by the care with which he selected foods Marsha, who is sixteen weeks pregnant, could eat. I think he is very happy about the baby. This is as close to an affirmation as you'll get with John. I've never met anyone so self-contained. Bill Haycox arrived and is staying at the Ramada Inn just down the strip from us. Litany of complaints about his room. He has ants. He seems to travel only to shop and is on a lifelong quest for ever more CDs.

Bill and John are old school mates but Marsha and Bill have the strangest relationship. Seems to be based on mutual abuse. He seems to lap up the rude remarks she lobbs at him, while she is often derailed by his sarcasm. They jab and feint around each other. He criticizes and frets, she pontificates and demands. Bill, by the way, finished his screenplay for "The Aunt Marjorie Chamber." Talk about an awkward time warp. He started it seven years ago and I lost interest in it even before it was published. Marsha said he brought it with him to Daytona. So far he hasn't said a word about it and I'm not touching the subject.

Went "Down Under" for dinner. Little suburban houses with lush gardens. Incredible amount of traffic, no sidewalks. Weird TV, total nostalgia. Tonight, *Nanny and the Professor*, *Ghost and Mrs Muir*, *Family Affair*. Also available *The Partridge Family* and *Gilligan's Island*. Meanwhile Nick and Nite is hosting *Taxi* appreciation week.

Nov. 7

Side-trip to visit Linnea Danielson, one of Fred's friends from the Feline-L list. She lives in Lochloosa, an 80 acre farm in the heart of the panhandle. Stark roadside crosses, hurricane evacuation route signs. Groves of citrus fruit trees; oranges, tangerines. Grapefruit turning from pale green to orange, sweetening in the sun. Flea market selling suits of armour, homage to Ponce de Leon. Pawnshops and pick-ups everywhere. A few, only a few, signs in Spanish. Tiny real estate office also selling live bait with a mobile sign out front which says, "Please Pray for Young Will Brown."

Everywhere mementoes of the election a campaign slogan promises, "Ron Saunders is a 4th Generation Floridian." I can see how, in this territory of migrants and snowbirds, that would be a campaign booster. Judges, schoolboard and Congressional reps all headed for their day of reckoning. The Democrats have only been in power two years and the Republicans are using the campaign of change, anti-government, anti-corruption. They seem to be spinning farther and farther away from Eisenhower's republicanism and I wonder what will eventually happen to the traditional two parties here. Surely two parties can't continue campaigning on change and anti-government forever. A deep schism in the Republican party was revealed on those Elect Oliver North signs in Virginia and I'm very worried the lunatic Right will take over. Nixon and Reagan have opened the door to all manner of loons. Judging by the propaganda it's a close and nasty race here in Floria, which I think was traditionally Democrat. "Re-elect Big Daddy Garlits." Big Daddy also owns a race track.

Hundreds of churches, Baptist and otherwise. Probably one church for every six houses. New Light Assembly of God, Full Gospel Tabernacle, the Progressive Primitive Baptists. Massive christian academies and bible colleges, which look very military. "He is Coming. Be Ready." Promise or threat? A memo from the Office of Fear.

Suit of armour in the foyer of a tiny house. Pick-up bearing a University of South Vietnam. School of Warfare bumper sticker. Trailers, tiny screened houses overwhelmed by thunderclouds of vegetation. Everything draping, reaching down, groping. Sand roads, some Georgia-red.

Black families fishing on bridges. Every bridge in Florida seems to be lined with fishers, divining lines cast into the potential, nets drifting the emptiness. Fishing boats full of men, ropes, nets pulling up crabs. Unlike California, everywhere I went I saw people working; servers, fishers, gardeners, contractors of all sorts. In San Francisco even the servers looked as if they were gliding across a stage.

The eye is pulled downward by the ropes and vines and the small houses look even smaller than they are, pressed by vegetation. But unlike the tiny houses along the San Andreas fault, which look so vulnerable and so much as if they're tempting fate, these Florida houses look as if they have taken root and will simply sink into the earth along with everything else.

Long pine needles moving in the breeze, sound of crickets. More buzzards. Hidden swamps, pineland bogs. Passed some tiny dusty quiet places linked by sawdust roads, main streets drowsing the in the shade of broad liveoaks. The woman in the visitors' centre near the Ocala Forest was originally from the Northeast and only comes to Florida in fall and winter.

**

Arrived at the Danielson farm in Lochloosa. One of the first things we heard was that it was at one time a 300 acre property until Linnea's brother somehow cheated their father out of the rest of the acreage. She told us this story in a dire tone of voice. A southern family grudge. Fred said he didn't really have a picture of Linnea but I guess I did, based entirely on her name. She was a stocky 42 year-old woman who works in the cataloguing department at the University of Florida (Gainesville) medical library. I got a pretty good idea of her politics by the bumper sticker on her van which said, "Don't blame me – I voted for Bush." She lives in a tumble-down trailer on the property but spends most of her time at her parents' house.

The house was interesting. It looked small and temporary as so many do in Florida, but when we entered, it was very traditional with the kinds of furnishings I would find in a Brockville farmhouse. Linnea was a navy brat. Her father was a navy chaplain and they've lived all over the US. Mrs Danielson is from New England and a lot of the antique furniture had a New England look. Met the family, father, mother and sister Nancy, who was vivacious and a born story-teller. Generous, hospitable people. Linnea and Nancy are breeders of Scottish fold cats. Nancy brought her kittens over for us to see, and the Danielsons have four long-haired folds in the house. Beautiful cats that lie on their backs, playful as otters. They served us a full-course southern meal for lunch: corn bread, hush puppies, grits, fried catfish. All delicious except for the sugary iced tea. Everyone held hands to say grace. I tried to keep my eyes closed to avoid the autographed photo of Rush Limbaugh on the fridge.

In spite of all the forbidding religion and politics we spent a pleasant day. First we roamed around the property and Linnea didn't mind when I paused frequently to take photos. We rode on her father's truck and fed the cows; the surprise of their firm moist snouts. Side trip to Cross Creek to see the Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings museum. It's a lovely small museum, which does give a sense of what it must have been like to live there during that time period. Not attempt to recreate the time period like Upper Canada Village. It was interesting enough to see the little house surrounded by citrus groves, light sliding along the warped branches of liveoaks.

Pleasant and companionable time browsing through antique stores in Micanopy, a charming village in the deep south. I was thinking it looked as peaceful and perfectly southern as a movie set when Linnea mentioned it was featured in a Michael J Fox movie. We visited a cemetery along a back road where Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and Linnea's grandparents were buried. I love cemeteries, especially when they are as old and evocative as this one. Nothing looks more ancient and mysterious than old tombstones where the letters are almost rubbed away. We read the headstones as if examining cyphers. Sand burrs tore strips off our ankles and some "skeeters" also out and about in the warm weather. I'm constantly forgetting it's autumn here, that Florida was sharing the same season with Canada.

A black cemetery across the road, untended, seemingly forgotten. Worn braille of tombstones lying loose in uncut brush. A headstone which had cracked open. Another wild little corner of Florida. As twilight descended and I looked at the wilderness around me, so unfamiliar and full of strange shapes and shadows I could almost understand Linnea's off-hand remark about keeping a 38 Beretta in her van. First library cataloguing editor I've ever met who packed heat.

Right-wing though they may be, the Danielsons share some qualities with the born-again christians I used to know. I'll never get used to the alliance between christianity and politics. It seems like such a change from my choir/Nazarene church days when christians remained apart from the world and politics. But then again, maybe all this right-wing stuff was always there and I just never tuned into it. Maybe it's only now that the right-wing groups that were always embedded in evangelical christianity have built enough bridges and become united and powerful enough to make such a huge impact. The Danielsons were like the christians I remember in showing off their hospitality and their religion, and also their tolerance of "worldly" non-christian visitors. Linnea had even offered to buy us some beer. All this said I enjoyed the day, saw some parts of Florida (and the south) that I never would have seen otherwise, and found Linnea a very agreeable companion.

Nov. 8

Port Orange with Marsha and John. Pelicans on posts. Hot, blinding sea, glazed sand. We ate and had Red Wolf beer in a restaurant that looked like a Jimmy Buffett hideaway, festooned with fish nets, a sign over the bar that said, "Unattended children will be sold into slavery." The server asked me for ID and I told her she made my day. She asked me how old I was and when I told her (the truth) she said I must take very good care of myself.

How to connect the countryside of Linnea Danielson with this Daytona Beach strip, which looks eerie every time I go for a walk. It's almost like some people's vision of heaven; clean, white and pastel, sterile. Plaster ships list twenty feet high in a mini-golf course while a pirate, spotlit in gold, contemplates the empty putting runnels. Blur of sand, salt-spray, illusory walls of the motels which seem to waver and float.

Store named The Big Kahuna (a Bill favourite). Standing on the pier “Down Under” you hear the music fade, see the chain of lights on the ferris wheel and the skyride stop turning. The glittering signs falter, slowly grow dim. Surf washes below and small boys pack up their tackle boxes. The arc of the shore is still bright with the golden light of the motels but these go out one by one as transient families draw the curtains of their ocean-front bedrooms. Vacancy signs burn into the sky.

But the pines and palmettos stir in the forests, shapes and sounds in the depths of Ocala Forest, unpaved roads around Cross Creek and Micanopy, the small ghost towns of vanished mills now subsisting on the scraps of the fishing and gospel industries. In the evening the sky layers orange over the deepening border of the forest. Though this part of Florida seems miles, years away from the Daytona strip it isn't. You feel that without constant vigilance the wilderness could drown the houses, motels and even the Big Kahuna.

Election results on TV. The Republicans have won control of the House. As expected the fights were tough and nasty. Newt Gingrich is now Speaker of the House and those who know predict a sharp turn to the right. I follow politics enough to know this was coming, but here in Florida I feel frightened the way I don't in Montréal reading my *Village Voice* and *Harper's Magazine*. I feel defenseless and out-numbered down here.

Nov. 9

St Augustine. Talk show radio is scary to the point where Rush Limbaugh is starting to sound like an amiable curmudgeon. Diatribes on how America is providing a welfare state for Mexicans. Switched the station in time to hear someone pontificating with the cadences of an evangelist: “We are *sinking* into a *sewer* of moral relativism.” Ormond Beach wilder, less famous than Daytona. Beautiful moody dunes, palmettos and grasses framing the shimmering vastness of the ocean. Mansions along the seaside designed by architects. Delirious view of a row of houses on stilts on a narrow strip of land.

St Augustine and Pensacola have been long-time rivals for the oldest city in the United States. St Augustine dates itself from the time of the first permanent European settlement: 1565 by Pedro Menéndez de Avilés. Meanwhile, Pensacola, much farther to the west, has erected a white cross to claim its title of oldest settlement: 1559. According to this guide book, Pensacolians “have been known to claim” that spies from St Augustine sneak over in the night and bury the cross in sand.

It’s been a long time since Fred and I passed through Pensacola on our way to New Orleans. I remember it as being bleak, a way-station on the way to New Orleans. Flimsy buildings, trash, white sand on the highway. It seems as if St Augustine has won the battle for tourist money. It seems far more prosperous and recreated, its history shaped for guide-books. Old St Augustine has been recreated into a collection of small museums, boutiques and restaurants. But when you look beyond the touristy sections, the architecture is such an interesting hybrid of periods and styles.

Florida has changed hands many times and each style of architecture has been left behind after a tide has pulled out. Unpainted timber buildings, very spare, puritanical, yield to a more lyrical French style of wrought iron, lacy balconies, all pushed into wild little corners by regal hieratic Spanish courtyards. The height, verticality of the shaved and pruned palms trees strongly reminiscent of San Francisco. St Augustine is also a palimpsest of old port, murals of pirates, conquistadors, sailors. Being on the coast, the town was strategic and vulnerable, sacked by pirates in the 16th and 17th centuries. St Augustine was ceded to England in 1763 and British loyalists sought refuge in the city during the revolution. In 1783, St Augustine was traded back to Spain. Encouraged by Spanish land grants, Americans flooded onto the property vacated by the English. Florida became a US possession in 1821.

Plaza de la Constitucion, which was the central business section of the old city, was also the site of the slave market. Just outside the old town is an area of old mansions garbed in vegetation where the only signs of life were black gardeners and contractors. Lunch at Scarlett O’Hara’s, a two storey with balcony. Columns as silvery grey as the oaks surrounding them. A white wrought iron balcony as lovely as any in New Orleans. Reminders that I’m in the southern US as well as Florida. Outside the Daytona strip, Motel Deco where I’m surrounded by tourists and transients, Florida is the Deep South.

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I can't get the phrase "sewer of moral relativity" out of my mind. Here I am constantly confronted by my own viewpoints and the realization that I'm a product of my time and places just as everyone is. Educated in the 70s, 80s by teachers and profs who were shaped by the 60s, growing up in a mid-sized city which didn't project (to me) any history or tradition. I read *Mad Magazine*, *Rolling Stone*. I believe in relativity, in diversity, in humanism, in a strong backbone of social services but these are not human verities – these are belief systems just as christian fundamentalism is a belief system. Here, all these ideas I hold dear are considered bad things. Relativity is a sewer. Humanism, instead of being an interesting compassionate system of philosophy is bad because it supposedly set humans up as more powerful than god. Assumptions or premises the reverse of my own.

There is something strangely ironic in the attacks of relativity because here, in the south, it is absolutely necessary to be relative, to detach from the beliefs you hold close and to think of things entirely in terms of their relativity to other things. You have to reverse all your own values to see the south, to have any understanding of it. To me, the south is a deeply morally relativistic place, a carnival funhouse full of mental and moral contortions to remain on middle ground. Segregated cemeteries, old city centers that were once slave markets, etc etc. People like the Danielsons, their violent politics, liking for Bush, Limbaugh and guns juxtaposed with their hospitality, family feeling and good company. What can I do but appreciate the good and otherwise keep my mouth shut. I consider this moral relativity.

And the conspiracy theories – diatribes against Mexicans and criminals (Mexicans as criminals), really creepy evangelists denouncing social welfare somehow twisting it so their brand of christianity goes *against* the teachings of Christ. What all these radio pundits do is take real questions and issues, turn people against each other, instead of the employers, corporations, cynical politicians and authority figures of all sorts, the bad systems where anger should be directed. The siege mentality of this christian fundamentalism is so strong. They are locked into this image of themselves as being on their own against powerful forces. These evangelicals may be the strongest lobby group in the US right now but you would never know it to hear them speak. Thousands strong and they are still alone in a hostile world.

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There is an illusory quality about the south, in the way light slides down the twisting branches and makes it impossible to see with clarity. The south can only be seen through the gauze of Spanish moss and through the filter of moral relativism. More mansions, homes of colonial settlers in their sub-tropical empire.

The four of us returned to the Lighthouse in Port Orange. Soft and dreamy, a clearing in the foliage, sound of the sea, sway of branches, glow of lantern light, a waitress named Phyllis who babied me and told us all about her oral surgery. Next week she will be getting a brand new set of “gorgeous white teeth.” She was so happy we toasted the occasion.

Nov. 10

Motel-hopping with Bill. He couldn't tolerate his room at the Ramada (forever known as the Dump) and switched to the Hilton. The four of us took a lovely beach-walk over to check out how the other half was living, a jacuzzi inspection and to find out how Bill's side of the ocean felt. Waterbirds with yellow racing stripes down their legs, beaks as precise and specialized as tweezers. Schools of minnows. When we reached the Hilton, there was poor shmucky Bill sitting ignominiously in the lobby, just like a chastised schoolboy. The Hilton hadn't prepared his room yet and he was surrounded by construction mayhem. We did lunch and when we returned, he had his room. It was very nice but the four of us felt we were getting a much better bargain at the Sandcastle. Bill collects his grievances like boy scout badges. He sets himself up for disappointment, his eyes goggling in disbelief at each outrage. Yet Marsha takes his whingeing so seriously and gets worked up about it. I find it hard not to laugh at his ridiculous mishaps.

Wonderful swim in the ocean. Waves especially turbulent and I was swept away from the group. I didn't notice the dark stain spreading across the sky. It wasn't until I saw the other three emerging from the water that I noticed distant lightning. The clouds had thickened and shadows crept like judgment across the shore. A huge darkness gathering in the distance, an eclipse light.

One powerful world moving above another and Zeus from his throne of clouds commanded, DANCE, and the bones of lightning rattled, jerked and did the hokey-pokey against the padded wall of cloud. Shore teeming with gulls. The palms shivered disconsolately and then the rain obliterated the motel strip. Ocean dissolving and coming together with land. I had wanted to see the beach during a storm and I more than got my wish. Marsha, who loves storms, was also thrilled.

Nov. 11

Little houses in the Daytona suburbs submerged in vegetation. Blue, pink, white rectangles seep in the hold of palms and great spade-shaped leaves. Some very poor houses with torn screen porches, peeling paint, junk in the yards. They all seemed to have No Trespassing signs posted on the walls. A palm pushes up through the rotting wood of an abandoned house.

Florida has a long history of people coming in search of better lives and full of impossible dreams. It is haunted by ghost galleons looking for rich Seminole villages. Florida was discovered during a Quixotic quest for the Fountain of Youth. I also read that Florida is the exact location of the original Garden of Eden. The Garden's location is along the east bank of the Apalachicola River between Bristol and Chattahoochie, Florida – at least it is according to AR Jones, author of *Man Before the Flood*, who died in 1964, but whose words live on throughout the state. It is also the play where Noah made the Ark of gopher wood. All this because of a very rare tree, the Torreya.

You end up searching for what is genuine, native in Florida, and maybe it is these fractured bible stories. I'm always looking out for the small houses with old cars, abandoned stores along the highway, half-deserted back-country hamlets. Some of the wooden houses scattered along the way to Lochloosa looked like forcibly depopulated villages. Everywhere discounts for the the AARP (American Association of Retired People)

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Bill finally gave me the screenplay and we talked about writing and screenplays. He said my writing (in the “Aunt Marjorie Chamber”) was done in vivid blocks and you could almost insert commercial breaks between the episodes. The screenplay isn’t half bad. It sounds like Bill. The expository scene-setting parts are concise – insightful and analytical. Strange to see someone’s summation of your work. The screenplay is like an x-ray of the story and it’s very interesting to see what’s been cut out and what remains in someone else’s view. This is Bill’s summary of the rec room: “The room is typical, mismatched furniture and lamps, toys, bric-a-brac, an old rug on the linoleum floor.” Also pretty good was Bill’s rendition of the characters. What I really didn’t want was a nostalgic rear-view look at childhood. It’s a story about belief, really; the point in time when manipulation becomes real. For me the story has no interest if it’s merely a memento of the time Crissy set up a spook house in the basement. Bill seems to have kept the story’s integrity.

I wasn’t thrilled about the dialogue though. It doesn’t ring true as his exposition does. Too much of the dialogue is pure TV sit-com, eight year-old kids cracking wise. I guess the screenplay is a lot like Bill, part witty and concise and part shallow and sit-comish. I know Bill was feeling reticent about giving it to me at all. He hadn’t said a word about it until today. He gave it to me, qualified in lots of apologies and said he was probably best at rewriting other people’s work, touching up sentences etc. In fact, Bill may never have given it to me if John hadn’t teased him by saying, “Do you have the screenplay?” I have never seen this humble, unconfident Bill before, and I was happy to have many positive things to say about the screenplay.

Final delicious catfish dinner at Aunt Catfish. Watched a strange but vivid movie, *Highlanders* with Marsha and prepared for a long two-day journey north.

Dec. 6

Skulking around McGill again. Spoke to Cynthia at the Circulation desk. She is now Circ supervisor and takes her responsibilities seriously. Still detests Suzy Slavin though and has been thinking a lot about her future. Surprising run-in with Martin Cohen. I heard someone call, “Lesley Battler?” I turned and saw him, looking like a badger in his fur coat. He seemed delighted to see me, asked about my work and then about my real work. He asked if there were any new publications. Then he kissed me on both cheeks. What a funny little hobbit he is.

Met Gail and we went to Basia’s and complained about work, specifically managers who don’t want to manage. They’re re-establishing performance evaluations at Howard Ross – now that Louise is gone and there are no problems with drugs, truancy or embezzlement. Sheila Gover (from Database Management) is currently doing Louise’s job. She’s a calm, patient person but is finding it hard working with Jane. Gail and I were in stitches imagining Jane dancing with Tom O’Connor and how they would look like “Sprockets.” Stick-insect people with sucked-in cheeks, mouths pursed in disapproval.

Dec. 7

BIS Christmas luncheon. Last year’s lunch was an awful morose occasion. I didn’t want to go, Betty said she was going to get out of it somehow and even Ginette confided that she didn’t want to go. None of us was willing to face the Elise juggernaut. Elise is the one who wants these lunches and no one can bear to tell her that no one in this office can stand each other, and no one wants to pay to sit across a restaurant table from each other. We rallied, and the lunch was much better this year. Julie Cardinal is new, a part-time librarian hired to index in French. I like her very much and working with her is a pleasure. She teaches on-line searching at U de M and is married to an Algerian. She is such a breath of fresh air, especially compared to Betty, Heather, Ginette and the dreadful Susan Baumann. Julie has been teaching me Windows. We talk, exchange ideas. Unlike Susan B she is naturally helpful and pleasant. She’ll answer my phone and doesn’t treat me with contempt. I love the days she in and it’s a delight being with her and Véronique.

Dec. 15

Fred on his way to Michigan. Livonia to visit his Aunt Lynn, Bay City to visit his cousin Carol and Lansing to visit his Internet friend, Connie Crew. He set off today. Around nine o'clock at night the loneliness settled in all around me. Natasha followed me around, howling disconsolately, when she wasn't huddled in corners with her fur ruffled. Boris, on the other hand, seemed quite pleased. He didn't once claw the chair or go near Oma's wall-hanging. This is the first time Fred has been away for any length of time since we moved into the house. All of the sounds are strange, creepy. I kept hearing footsteps on the stairs. I felt isolated as if in the world of *Kabloonak*. I heard the bathroom pipes gasp, the long exhalation of the furnace, cat rustlings and thuds. Then I thought of Sharon, how she must have felt after hearing about Ernie's death.

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Howard Ross Christmas Party. Bob Clark was bouncing around, glad-handing everyone he saw, buttoned-up to the chin. Found out his major was in Canadian history. He's so outgoing, forward-thinking and optimistic. Gail saw the necklace I bought in Florida and knew immediately it was from the south and why I bought it. There are so many things I don't have to explain to her, so many things she just understands. She had her annual crisis over cooking for the party. She's a wonderful cook but puts so much pressure on herself. She ended up crying in her kitchen last night and Ravil took over and made the casserole. And there was Dorothy gazing at Bob and saying, "I agree with you, Bob," in a whisper of heartfelt conviction, nodding and passionately agreeing with his *jokes*. I guess every court has at least one sycophant. She kept calling me Brenda and I didn't bother correcting her. At least she's not larcenous. Jane came in about the time I had to return to work, which was disappointing as I had hoped to see more of her. It had been a dull day of stats and invoices at BIS and I was not thrilled about leaving the party.

At the end of the day Véronique, Julie and I talked and I told them Fred was in Michigan. I also described how weird it was, being alone in the house, the sounds, isolation etc. Véronique understood exactly how it feels being alone in a house in the suburbs.

The three of us walked in a row across the Bering Strait of the concourse. The tree is up, bombastic carols echoing through the station. Darkness underscores the world this time of year. Véronique and I said goodbye to Julie and then Véronique invited me to dinner at Île de France with herself and Nicholas. I had planned to trudge up the hill to see if anyone was still at the Howard Ross party, but this was a special occasion. Met Nicholas. He is similar to Fred in appearance; small, long face, straight hair at about the same length. He was even dressed in something Fred would wear. He was very pleasant, intelligent and gallant.

The L'Île-de-France is one of Véronique's European-style restaurants, wood, soft light, excellent red wine. We lingered, drank wine and talked about all kinds of things. Nicholas said Véronique had told him about me, compliments, I was "meticulous" in my work. Véronique and I talked about mothers. Véronique's mother is an aging "seductress" and sounds quite a bit like mine. I like Véronique so much. She is so intelligent, perceptive about people. Her emotions are deep and rich and so is her humour. Her humour is often quite self-deprecating and dark. She can be shy, reflective, driven, philosophical, gloomy, tense, furious, elated, charming, earthy, impulsive, generous and always intelligent. She can be a difficult boss but a rich, complex, interesting person to know. She has always treated me with respect.

After dinner Véronique invited me to stay the night with them. We stopped in Dorval so I could pick up pyjamas and feed Boris and Natasha, who were not happy to see me leave again. Véronique admired the house and said that was why I ended up in Dorval.

Véronique and Nicholas live in Lachine, on Provost, in a classic Lachine house that resembles the Mills's. Minimal furniture, no books; all of their money goes to restaurants and vacation trips. Lovely hardwood floors and renovated fireplace (the same fireplace set we splurged on at the Medieval Shop). Not the home of a typical librarian, which is usually stuffed with books and possessions, especially cultural cachet. Tribal masks from Tahiti, etc.

We sat by the fire and listened to some CDs; Milton Nascimento, Bottine Souriante. She said she's becoming more French as she gets older. Talked about radio shows, how the French CBC can be as "clubby" as the English with the same tenured hacks. They switch stations all the time just as I do. I told them about wanting to be a DJ on CKUT and Véronique said she'd love to do that too. Very comfortable bed, CN blanket. Véronique's step-father worked for CN. Leisurely breakfast, café au lait.

Dec. 18

Saw *Ivan and Abraham* at the Faubourg. Written and directed by Yolande Zauberman. Shot in stunning black and white with scenes as formal and brilliantly set up as some fashion photography. Another eastern European film depicting a harsh world in a series of beautiful stills. It takes place somewhere on the Polish border in the 1930s, the geography and chronology are vague, maybe to emphasize the biblical overtones in the story, the David and Jonathan quality of the friendship between the two boys.

No cities appear in the film, and were it not for the single automobile belonging to a dissolute prince, the entire film could be taking place in biblical times. The landscape looks biblical, the boys flee for what seems 40 days and 40 nights in desert. You can imagine this terrain devastated by drought, the blood of ancient hatred. This is terrain that has been depleted and raped. The first half is a dark Shabbos night populated by hysterical rumours, anti-Semitic agitators, villagers with torches and pitchforks, the impoverished dispossessed who still retain some sense of entitlement in search of someone to blame for their worsening circumstances. These are the haunts that come out of that land. The second half of the film follows Ivan's and Abraham's exodus, flight beyond the Pale of Settlement where they are labelled Gypsies.

It is a harsh, unsentimental (though gorgeously photographed) view of shtetl life. Abraham's grandfather is not a wise tzaddik. He is an autocrat, a family tyrant who tries to force Rachel into an arranged marriage and pronounces Abraham "worse than a goy" because of his friendship with Ivan.

The film takes us to the muddy marketplaces, decrepit rural inns full of peasants, a chaotic wooden shul presided over by a disaffected melamud. It's also clear that this world isn't separate from the world of the Polish peasantry. The Jews are also shabby with unmanageable children, yet their houses are filled with tablecloths, dishes, candlesticks which fuel the resentment of the peasantry. Beautiful images of eternal friendship, brotherhood between Ivan and Abraham but they look like lambs just before the slaughter of the pogroms. Came out of the world of the film to see Ivan Ivessa sitting at a table in the Faubourg!

Dec. 22

Took the Via train to Toronto. Fog filled the world just outside Kingston. One moment it was sunny, the next erased in fog. The light dimmed, the world was obliterated. The woman sitting beside me woke up with a start. "Why do these things always happen around Kingston?" she said. We exchanged stories of blizzards and cars sliding off the road and how this always seems to happen just outside Kingston – and on the 400 at the Simcoe County line. The Via became a mystery train where we could no longer see where we were or remember where we were going, fog as dense and erasing as amnesia. We eventually pulled into Union Station and I just followed the tide of people down escalators, into corridors.

Met Fred and Sharon and went to Sharon's house. She's been renovating again. The living room looks brighter and whiter than ever. She wallpapered the kitchen with a geranium pattern that seems to whirl around your head like a flowery galaxy. She has gone over the top with her flowers, frills and romanticism. It's unique, an almost insistently feminine motif combined with her excessiveness. Her living room is a Victorian parlour. The TV, Christmas tree, newspapers, afghans are consigned to the rec room. You get the strange feeling of a split personality going from the almost sterile perfection of the living room and master bedroom to the homey Prescott-like rec room.

But I remember this being true of a lot of middle-class houses when I was growing up. The kids would be allowed to play in the rec room with the living room reserved as a show room, a museum for adults. Sharon seems to be subconsciously doing the same in her never-ending quest for middle-class respectability. It should also not be any kind of surprise to see her house reflect her dual nature.

She can appear to be the most tenacious, moralistic and Puritanical person there is. It is not a put on. She can chill you to the bone with her disapproval. But there's also a complete openness to her. She takes from people, absorbs their personalities, their likes and dislikes, their possessions like a sponge and she becomes those things in an astonishing way. So many times I have heard her mention someone and then find out next visit she has always believed what that person believes.

This is why she went to bed with Marsha's boyfriends and brother Mark, why she had to have Al, why she became embroiled with Jim Mills and Sir Jefforie. She wanted what Marsha and I had; she wanted to be us. I've rarely come across someone who projects her subconscious so physically with so little awareness of it. She isn't malevolent, as Val and Jim have said, she doesn't set out to take from people and hurt them. In fact, if I described someone who did the things she did she would be disgusted.

Bill Knox joined us for dinner. He resembled Patty a little with his sharp grey eyes and poker face. You can't tell by his facial expression what he's thinking. Much banter between him and Sharon. He teases her, calls her out on some of her most cherished opinions. He teased her about her chiropractor, orthodontist, hairdresser, esthetician. Interesting to see the two of them together – his barbs of honesty, her artifice and sense of moral rightness. Most of the time she dismisses his comments but sometimes they really hit home. Not surprising she sees all these professionals though. Sharon is all about renovation; renovating her appearance, her home, her character, and you need a lot of professionals for renovating!

Dec. 23

We left for Barrie, Sharon for Prescott. She has to spend five days there so she can see her sister, Gail. Gail and Mark have separated. Mark is still living in the house, drinking, acting like a jerk. Sharon said the black cloud has moved from her to her sister. Sharon stood in the driveway, waving and smiling. No one has a more beautiful smile than Sharon. Once again she shape-shifted into a dreamy, vulnerable, dear dear friend. There are times she makes my heart ache.

Dec. 25

Went to the white church in Dalston to hear Marsha's mother, Marjorie, preach. Donnalee and her boyfriend Carl were there. This time I could see what Marsha was talking about. Donnalee was made up as a seductress, her every gesture self-conscious and staged. There's a blend of the insecure and defeated and the brashly sexual about her. Her posture is found-shouldered. She looked heavy, defeated, yet she literally vamps for the camera. There's nothing natural about her appearance. She only looks you in the eye when she's playing one of her roles. Otherwise she hugs herself, gazes at the floor. She is intelligent and interesting to talk to though. There's a strong competition between her and Marsha and she never missed an opportunity to take a pot-shot at her sister.

Donnalee was the only one who could hit the high notes of the hymns and she sang with aplomb, her face taking on a look of religious fervour. Marjorie called her up to read a passage from the Gospel of John. DL read well and I found myself thinking how bizarre and mystifying that gospel is. So much comes from the passage that DL read today: the concept of the trinity, the merging of God and the Word, the Word (which is God) made flesh through Jesus Christ (who is also God). No separation between the work and its creator. John has made it so you can't discuss the creation in and of itself without discussing its author. The words of John were exciting and unexpected in a C-mas morning service. No inns, mangers, wise men etc, but the presence of god in everyday life, in one's self. God's mysterious and all-pervasive presence.

Marjorie Smith looked like an executive in a tidy green suit and short styled hair. She has a brisk down-to-earth manner. Very matter-of-fact and sincere in her faith. A voice you could trust. I could hear Marsha in her when she included a personal anecdote in her sermon. Like Marsha she takes the everyday and adds a little spiritual message to it. She brought in a birthday cake for Jesus's birthday and we all had a piece to celebrate. A nice homey, woman's touch in the ministry.

After the service we went to Marjorie's farmhouse for lunch. We met her new husband Dave, who is also a minister in a rural parish. He looks a little like John Cheever, very Ivy League and he must cut quite an authoritarian figure in church. He had 40 in his congregation this morning – a little preacher rivalry! He had also taken in a birthday cake but hadn't used it. I got the impression he wasn't comfortable with the concept.

Extremely amusing conversation with Donnalee and Carl about the Gospel of John. We mocked its language, mystification and quoted its most obfuscating passages at each other. Especially the part where John answers questions about his identity entirely in negatives. It sounds like Abbott and Costello's "Who's On First" comedy routine.

Q: Who are you?

A: I am not the Christ.

Q: Are you Elijah?

A: I am not.

Q: Are you the prophet?

A: No

Q: Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say for yourself?

A: I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness ...

If only you could answer job interview questions like this!

Q: Then why are you baptizing if you are neither the Christ nor Elijah nor the prophet?

A: I baptize with water; but among you stands one whom you do not know, even he who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.

Then the text becomes a model of journalistic daftness: "This took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing."

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When we finally left Barrie the car was vibrating as if ready to explode. We turned off the 400 and took the long way, passing places we rarely see, Aurora, Richmond Hill; all the small places now in the Toronto Nexus. Everything closed, all of those almost identical small-town Ontario storefronts dark and utterly still. Christmas Day and it looks as if there was an evacuation and the only people left in the world were at Mike's Milk. We had to drive into a cemetery (only thing open) so I could pee. It really does seem desolate when the donut stores are closed and the Golden Arches dimmed.

We had intended to visit Sharon in Prescott but Fred decided we couldn't venture beyond Kingston. Marsha and John were home, as Marsha was on call as chaplain. She had also preached this morning but no one showed up. She had to do it, though, as it was being broadcast through closed circuit TV to all of the hospital rooms. She was on the warpath again, this time against the medical profession, of which she now know a lot due to her position as hospital chaplain. We talked about doctors, their attitudes to pregnancy and why she's choosing a midwife. We agree that doctors consider pregnancy a pathology, an illness rather than a natural fact of life, or even something to celebrate.

Only at Marsha's will you find holy bibles and "Bitch Woman" cards. I mentioned attending her mother's church in Dalston and the sermon on John. Marsha immediately produced a bible so I could read the whole thing. Then watched *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and loved it. Wonderful caustic art work, catchy songs, Giacometti figures. Christmas was completely subverted as it bloody well should be.

Dec. 26

Lingered in Kingston for a day. Dinner party with Bill, Diane Keon, Terry Murphy and Carole. Was struck by Terry Murphy's resemblance to my thesis advisor. Every time I looked at him I felt I should be making excuses about why my thesis proposal isn't done yet. I like Terry's quiet intelligence, courtesy, knowledge of current events. Again, more than a little like Terry Byrnes.

I like Carole a lot. She's a francophone, and an outsider to the Regi (Regiopolis-Notre Dame Catholic High School) group, friends John has had since high school. There's a bottom-line quality to Carole, which makes me feel if I asked her something she would tell me with complete frankness and I wouldn't necessarily like the answers. No pretensions, no artifice and very much the opposite of Diane Keon.

Diane Keon appears to be all energy, enthusiasm and artifice. It is much more difficult to get to know her than it is to know Carole. Diane laughs, jokes, flits from person to person spreading her joie de vivre. She is almost relentlessly positive, all possibility, moving from New York City to Australia again with her company without acting as if it means any more to her than another excellent adventure.

It's interesting how Diane conceals her steel-trap mind by being "belle of the ball," dancing with everyone who has lined up for a dance with her. She always seems to be equally interested in everyone, every topic of conversation. It's interesting to see Marsha topped at her own game. Diane is the star of John's group and everywhere she goes she is accompanied by her swain, Bill. Very amusing. I don't imagine I will ever get over my envy of Diane – and Marsha.

Dec. 27

The car started vibrating again outside of Kingston. Fred pulled into a restaurant parking lot somewhere on the road and tightened the wheel, and we were able to continue along Highway 2. Houses extravagantly lit up with C-mas lights. Looked like a competition. Houses lit up like theatre marquees, each entrance promising a gala, an opening night, Broadway. Lawns full of Santas, elves, creches, full-scale manger scenes. Reindeer pranced across rooftops, bushes burned with light. A ship, large as a shopping centre move slowly and inexorably as destiny, along the St Lawrence.

We finally did make it to Prescott but Sharon had returned to Toronto earlier that morning. Betty recognized us, invited us in and we talked with Gail for a while. The Thorpe's living-room reminds me so much of the living room I remember; the same enormous flowered couch, console stereo with fake wood panelling, giant cabinet. Also the same hospitable but stifling overheated feeling. Gail looked tired and no wonder, the divorce draining her. Meanwhile, Betty's walls were covered with wedding photos of her and Mark.

Dec. 31 to Jan. 2, 1995

New Year's Eve and a special guest – Val. Valerie Vail in the flesh. Heard Janis Joplin on the radio before heading to the bus terminal, very appropriate. Sped down the aisles and there she was, peering anxiously into the crowd. She looked the same and was dressed the same in a blue ski jacket, back pack, tartan scarf, her rich dark-brown hair parted the way it had been at Elrond. We fell into each other's arms in the middle of the bus terminal. "Do you realize," she said, "we did a Snoopy dance in the middle of the terminal." She has been working out, her body looked very powerful, almost overwhelmingly so. The first thing she noticed about me were my teeth and I told her about the operation. It has been a long time.

The Croissant de lune was closed and we went for brunch at la Brulerie, aroma of coffee, commotion of people, little tables cheek-by-jowl. Val was companionable, open to any suggestions. She still loves a good steak. We gradually got caught up. My dad's death, the book, the astrological society, McGill, Concordia – eight years and so many major events reduced to nothing. She has left museums and got a job in the government, Department of Agriculture. She's now in Human Resources. She always was more pragmatic than me about money, career, things like getting a job in the government. She said she had been dead for six years. She was living with Dan Cottenden for five years in some kind of strange relationship and she eventually moved out, only now starting to see people again.

She's become interested in Native spirituality by said (reassuringly) she didn't want to become "one of those white Indians." She also learned she's been emotionally abused her entire life by her mother and her Aunt Muriel. No surprise to me. It's always been a miracle to me how Val kept her fire and originality through so many years with that cold, repressive, angry woman. Cal had been seeing a counsellor for many years. She is still original, expressive, irrepressible, vivid. Our talk bubbled with old jokes and references to arcane books, movies and common interests.

Took her to the Medieval Store and browsed happily through chain mail vests, breeches, various gargoyles and jesters' hats. I found out part of the reason for her new renewal is because she's in love with Steph, a 23 year old student who was working in HR for a while but returned to school.

She loved the Medieval Store and I think that was largely because of Steph. He's an Apprentice Wizard on a MUD called Gateway, hence she's become interested in all things medieval. After that, we went on a triumphal return to Drags. When we got to the house she made herself at home and it was so refreshing to have her there. It felt natural. She even made us scrambled eggs (the Al Leake recipe). We drank champagne and shared a doobie at midnight.

Next day we did Tarot readings all afternoon as the snow fell and fell until there was no outside world. We were deep in the interior talking about Al, Jim, Sharon, old conspiracies. I showed her some of my old photos of Elrond. We wallowed in nostalgia as the snow threatened to cover the house. Gleefully, and without admitting it, we projected our own desires on our Tarot readings. Val asked questions about Steph. I asked if I should give up writing and put my energy into a career, as for the first time I feel that could happen. It was a strange reading, which invoked a lot of major arcanum cards, indicating career matters aren't in my control right now.

Spent some time on Steph's MUD, Gateway under assumed names. We flirted with an Aussie who went by the name Gregor. Steph was on-line at the same time, which was an odd feeling. It's strange knowing exactly where someone who is living in a different city is and what he's doing. Nothing in the world like the Internet.

Val wants a computer, modem and connection. This is one of the cool things about Val. We can go back in the past, become nostalgic, maudlin even, go to medieval stores and play with Tarot decks, then turn around and become utterly absorbed in the Internet. From past to future.

By the time evening set in Val wanted to call Al and I wanted to call Jim. We looked at each other, twirled our moustaches and laughed. Val found out Jim had Epstein-Barr disease. He really was sick, which was why he didn't have any energy and couldn't complete anything. He tried returning to McGill – this was before I started working there – but couldn't continue. He had an apartment on Docteur-Penfield for a while. His mother died. Val hasn't been in touch with him for a while. The last time she saw him he wasn't doing anything except working on his father's boat. We drank, played some of my albums and reminisced.

At the end of the visit she gave me a dream-catcher she had made herself. I guess I passed a test. Residual sense of caution between us, “feeling things out.” Saw her off at the bus terminal; no idea what next for us.